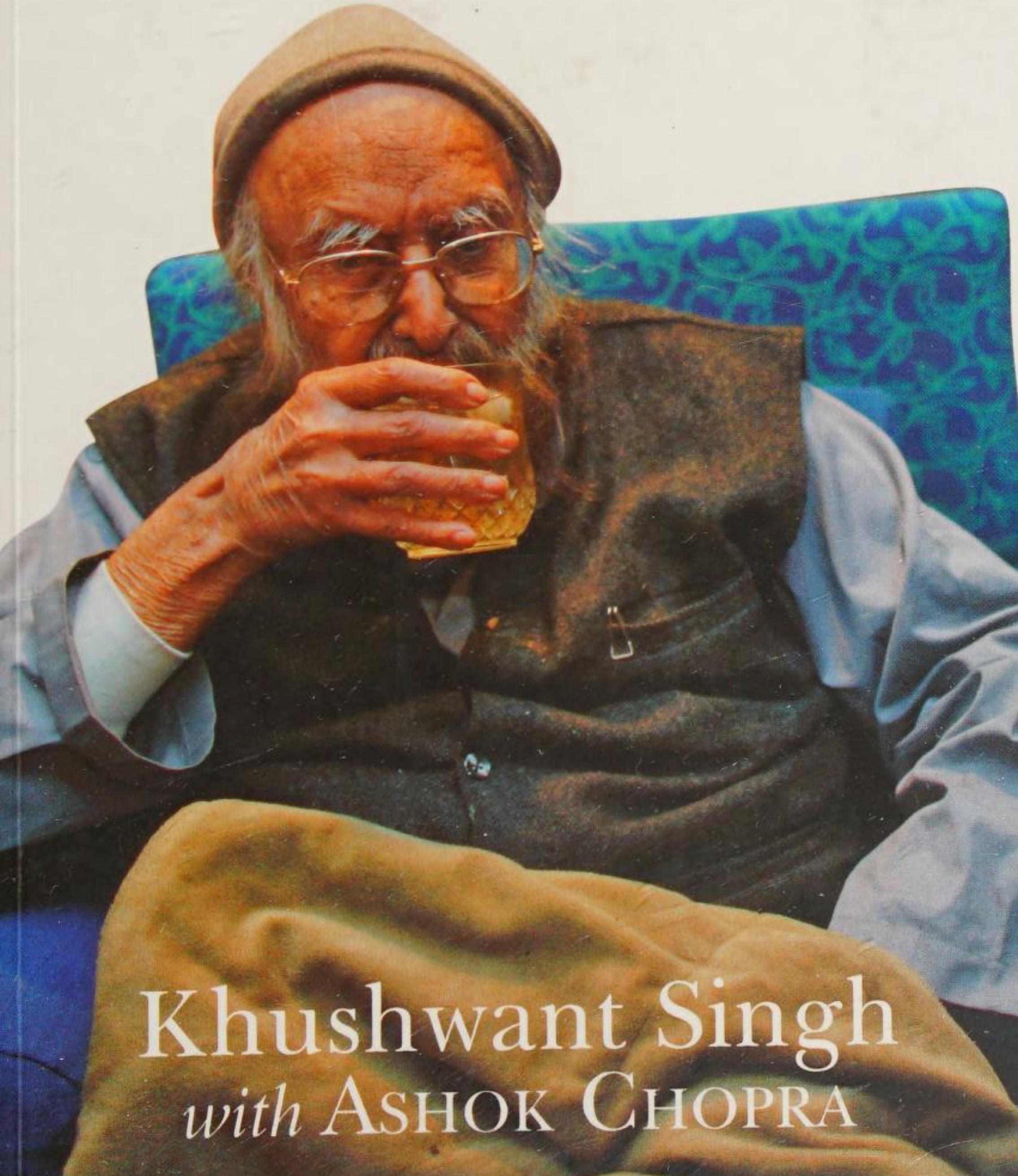
Agnostic Khushwant

THERE IS NO GOD!



Khushwant Singh

with Ashok Chopra

SHOUT
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IT

Vintage Khushwant fare served with heaps of provocative material, analytical insights, irrepressible irreverence and marked by the distinctive stamp of one of India's most prolific writers

Khushwant Singh, over the decades, has built up a reputation for coming up with something new and controversial in each book, and he does not disappoint his readers this time too. He begins with a chapter on the 'need for a new religion – without God', in which he questions the relevance of God. He then moves on to describe how religion has proved to be more harmful than beneficial and, in the process, debunks astrologers and the breed of so-called 'godmen'.

However, he is not dismissive of religion. Through his lucid writing, he brings out the beauty and significance of holy books such as the Bhagvad Gita, the Quran and the Granth Sahib. He provides relevant extracts to highlight the poetry and the music in such books.

The author next tries to dispel the prejudices held by many non-Muslims against their Muslim compatriots by giving down-to-earth examples. He also emphasizes the importance of the Ramzaan fast.

Khushwant Singh's description of the life and times of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh and his in-depth analysis of the Granth Sahib throw new light on a particularly troubled period in India's history.

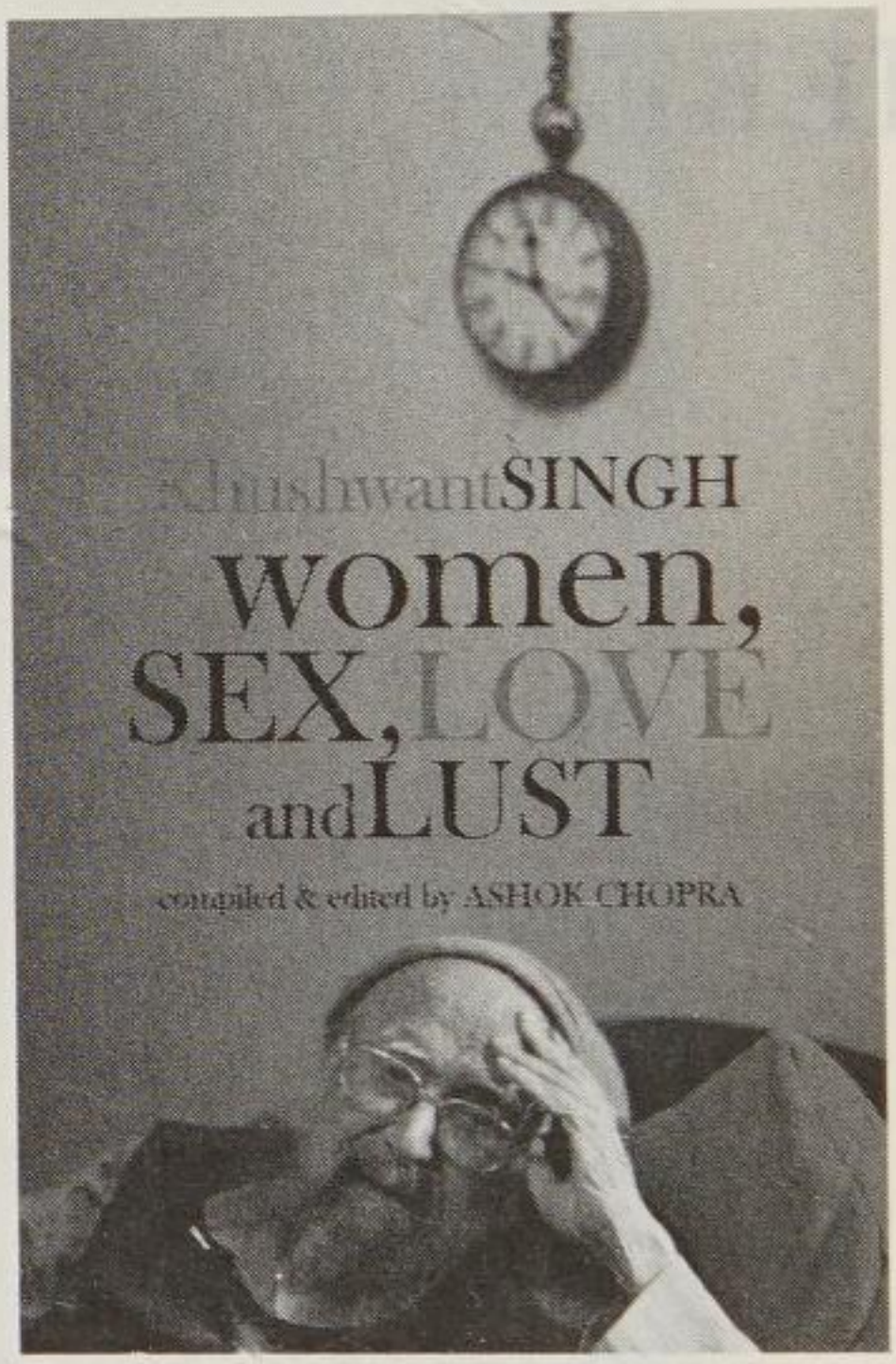
The chapter devoted to the interaction of the author (a confirmed agnostic) with the Dalai Lama (probably the world's most renowned spiritual leader) makes for fascinating reading.

Here's one book containing a wealth of knowledge and information that you would want to read or consult again and again.

Agnostic Khushwant

THERE IS NO GOD!

Also Available



An anthology of Khushwant Singh's best writings on his favourite subjects – Women, Sex, Love and Lust – is at once witty, informative, thought-provoking and flagrant. Definitely a book you can't afford to miss!

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To

Jaya Thadani

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Publisher's Note

What makes Khushwant Singh tick? Is it his irreverence towards well-established shibboleths? Is it his posturing as the 'sultan of sleaze', whereas he is, in reality, a scholar in his own right? Is it his uncanny ability to debunk godmen, astrologers and other assorted types of so-called 'spiritual gurus'? Is it his charisma that has created an aura around him? Whatever be the reason, the indisputable fact remains that his name has become synonymous with success. Book after book, he remains one of the highest selling Indian authors.

In the tenth decade of his life, he stands out as a colossus among Indian writers. He is a novelist, journalist, historian, short story writer, political commentator and translator all rolled into one! His admirers are legion and so are his detractors. But he holds no malice towards the latter. In fact, he takes his critics seriously.

He has been described as 'a consummate artist; a

conscious craftsman; and a master of his medium'. He has to his credit a vast corpus of work, which includes a variety of literary genres. Some of his books are considered classics. He himself is self-deprecatory; he has never laid claim to being a great writer and holds the view that 'self-praise is the utmost form of vulgarity'.

As a publisher, I can take credit for publishing the maximum number of Khushwant Singh's books under various imprints. If Khushwant Singh has forgotten the number of books he has written (more than a hundred at the last count), I too cannot remember how many of his books I have published over the last three decades and more!

Khushwant Singh, undoubtedly, is a publisher's dream and is exceptionally easy to work with. He is quick to accept editorial suggestions and answer the numerous queries that an editor invariably raises. His oeuvre has stood the test of time and many of his books continue selling even decades after they were first published, despite the onslaught of 24x7 TV channels and despite the spectacular reach of the Internet, not to mention the proliferation of CDs and DVDs all around.

My relationship with Khushwant Singh has been both professional and personal. I met him for the first time in 1970, when I was cutting my teeth in journalism. But it was in June 1978, when he had shifted back to Delhi from Bombay (Mumbai), that I got to know him well. He threw open his doors for me and, ever since, has been always very generous with his time. By that time, I had

switched over from journalism to book publishing. I have travelled with him to various parts of the country and spent many a convivial evening with him in Delhi and Kasauli (a hill station in Himachal Pradesh). Over the years, whenever I called him to fix an appointment, he responded: 'Come over right away.'

True to form, Khushwant Singh begins this volume with his characteristic élan by injecting elements of controversy. He underscores the fact that, over the ages, religion has turned out to be more divisive than cohesive. He also questions the relevance of God in his inimitable style.

However, he acknowledges the fact that religion cannot be wished away and has come to stay. He points out that holy books such as the Bhagvad Gita, the Quran and the Granth Sahib contain not only wisdom but also a lot of poetry and music. He provides relevant excerpts to drive home his point. The author next attempts to clear the cobweb of prejudices held by many non-Muslims against Muslims.

Khushwant Singh's study of the Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh eras and his in-depth analysis of the Granth Sahib reveal new aspects of a turmoil-filled phase in India's history. There's much more in this book that the reader can savour and relish. The menu is varied enough to tickle the palate! (The reader may find some

repetitive matter, but such repetition is necessary to ensure that each chapter is complete in itself.)

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to N. Krishnamurthy of Chennai, a diehard fan of Khushwant Singh, who has collected all the articles written by him over the decades in numerous publications. He has been kind enough to offer me his entire collection to pick and choose from.

I would also like to record my sincere thanks to Mustafa Quraishi, who opened up his treasury of Khushwant Singh photographs to select whatever I wanted.

Finally, a word of thanks to my Hay House colleagues: Rajalakshmi for painstakingly typing the entire mansuscript; Aeshna Roy for designing the cover of this book and also that of the earlier volume, *Khushwant Singh on Women, Sex, Love and Lust*; Rakesh Kumar for the page layout and design; and K. J. Ravinder for fine-tuning the text. Without them, this book would not have been possible!

– A. C.

Chapter One

The Need for a New Religion – without a God

On rare occasions when I visited a gurudwara or a temple, I made it a point to watch people making obeisance before the Granth Sahib [the holy book of the Sikhs] *or their favourite God. Those who took the longest time to rub their noses on the ground were usually those who more than others craved forgiveness for having lied, stolen, fornicated and made illicit money.*

George Bernard Shaw once wrote that every intelligent man makes his own religion though there are a hundred versions of it. Evolving a personal religion for myself has been a lifelong quest. It has been as the renowned poet Allama Mohammad Iqbal put it:

Dhoondta phirta hoon main, ai Iqbal, apney aap ko
Aap hee goya musaafir, aap hee manzil hoon main.
(O Iqbal, I go about everywhere looking for myself
As if I were the wayfarer as well as the destination.)

I was born a Sikh and reared in Sikhism. My parents were orthodox Sikhs who observed the traditions of the Khalsa Panth (unshorn hair and beards for men and carrying other emblems of the militant fraternity). Many religious rituals were observed in our home. A prayer room was set apart for the Granth Sahib. One or the other member of the family had to instal it on its pedestal in the early hours of the morning and put it back to rest in a cupboard in the evening. Everyone was expected to say his morning prayer (Japji) and read a hymn or two from the scripture before he or she came to the breakfast table. The evening prayer (Rehras) was a joint affair. We took turns in reciting it while others listened. Most of us also recited the last prayer of the day (Keertan Sohila) before switching off the lights.

My grandmother, with whom I shared a room till I was 18, spent the best part of the day mumbling prayers. There were frequent Akhand Paaths (non-stop reading of the Granth Sahib from cover to cover by a relay of *paathees*, professional priests, which takes two days and two nights). Occasionally, there was also a Sampat Paath, in which a favourite hymn had to be recited after every one of the 5000 hymns of the Granth; this could take upwards of a fortnight. All these *paaths* (at which attendance was de rigueur) were accompanied by keertans (devotional songs) sung by professional *raagis* (religious singers). On the birth anniversaries of the first Guru, Nanak, and the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, as well as the martyrdom anniversaries of the fifth Guru, Arjun Dev, and the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, we joined processions taken out through the streets and worshipped in public gurudwaras.

As a child of five I was initiated into reading the scriptures and could recite them by heart. At the age of 17, I underwent a baptismal ceremony (*amrit chakna* – sipping of ambrosial water), which symbolized that I had joined the Khalsa (the pure) fraternity. While in college, I began to question the value of these rituals and the need to conform to Khalsa traditions. However, I decided to go along with them rather than create trouble for myself. I took pains to understand the prayers I had been reciting. Good keertan continued, as it does to this day, to touch my emotional chords.

Meanwhile, while studying at St Stephen's College (in Delhi), I attended Bible classes. Although the emphasis

was on the New Testament and the life of Jesus Christ, it was the language of the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms, the Song of Solomon and the Book of Job, that I found myself drawn to. Later, while working on the translations of the Sikh scriptures, I found so many references in them to the Vedas, Upanishads and the epics, the Ramayana and Mahabharata (including the Bhagvad Gita or just Gita), that I decided to study them to better comprehend the meaning of my own Gurubaani or Gurbani (the voice of the Guru). Interest in religion also made me read whatever I could on Jainism, Buddhism and later developments in Hinduism. Islam was the last religion I turned to, largely to free myself of anti-Muslim prejudices, which had been instilled in me as a child. It was during the seven years in Lahore and my close association with Manzur Qadir (a leading jurist) that I began to question many of the assumptions made by all religions. He was a Muslim but did not offer namaaz (prayer) either at home or in a mosque even on the festival of Eid; neither did his uncle, Saleem, who was India's tennis champion for many years and preferred living like a European aristocrat, rather than a Muslim nawab. Being Muslim meant little to them besides an accident of birth. Neither of them bothered to make religion an issue. I did. No religion evoked much enthusiasm in my mind. By the time India gained Independence on 15 August 1947, I had gained freedom from conformist religion and openly declared myself an agnostic.

Following the publication of my two volumes on Sikh religion and history in 1963 titled *A History of the Sikhs* by Princeton University Press and the Oxford University Press, I was invited by the Spalding Foundation to deliver three lectures on Sikhism at Oxford University and also by Princeton, Swarthmore and Hawaii Universities (all three in the USA) to lecture on comparative religions. Once again I went over the scriptures and lives of the founders of the world's major religions.

Having done all this writing and lecturing, I felt mentally well equipped to express myself on religious beliefs and practices. And I feel more strongly than ever before the need to have not only a personal religion of my own but also to evolve a new set of beliefs for those Indians who have the courage to think for themselves. It is based on the assumptions that most people need some kind of faith to live with; that the emotional contents of that faith are best provided by the one into which one is born; and whose rituals have formed an integral part of his or her upbringing.

I feel what is required today is the acceptance of what is basic and rational in the religion of one's birth after removing from it the accretions of dead wood that have accumulated around it and militate against reason and common sense. I present this, the blueprint of my religion, for consideration and comment to my more enlightened countrymen.

Before I do so, I will first deal with five items, which are generally regarded as the pillars of all religions: Belief

in God; reverence for the founders of religions; the status of scriptures; the sanctity accorded to places of worship and pilgrimage; and the use of prayer and ritual. Since most of what I have to say on these topics may appear critical and negative, I will thereafter posit items for positive acceptance.

The Concept of God

Every religion has its own name and concept of God. He is Jehovah, Ishwar, Parmatma, Rabb, Khuda, Allah and Waheguru. He may be symbolized in the shape of idols, animals or other natural phenomena, or He may be regarded beyond physical representation in any form. He may be believed to be the only one, a trinity or a multiplicity of Gods. However different the ways of conceiving Him, what all religions have in common are the powers they attribute to Him. He is the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer; He is Omniscient (all-knowing), Omnipotent (all-powerful) and Omnipresent; He is just, benign and merciful to the faithful and at the same time an angry God who metes out dire punishment to transgressors. Whatever He be, we have to ponder over questions posed by the philosopher-saint, Adi Shankara, over a thousand years ago and find answers to them:

Kustwam? Ko Ham? Kutah ayatah?
Ko mein janani? Ko mein taatah?
(Who am I? Where did I come from and how?
Who are my real father and mother who gave me birth?)

If there are none, then we have to admit that we have got the God business all wrong. Nevertheless, different religions have given different answers to these questions. These answers can be grouped into two categories: Those given by the Judaic family of religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – and those given by the Hindic family of religions: Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

The Judaic group maintains that God created the world, sent out Adam and Eve to propagate the human race and created all other forms of life. According to it, one day, all life on earth will end and there will be a Day of Judgement when people will rise from their graves to be judged for the good or evil they did in life and accordingly be sent to heaven or hell. The Judeo-Christian-Muslim view of life is linear: it has a beginning, a middle and an end.

The Hindic view of life is cyclical: There is no beginning and no end but a continuing, unending cycle of births, deaths and rebirths. There is no heaven or hell (although Hinduism has words like *swarg* for paradise and *nark* for hell) but would have you believe that reward for good deeds and punishment for evil acts are meted out in the form in which a person will be reborn. Its real equivalent to heaven is release from *samsar/sansar* (world) and union (yoga) with the infinite that is God. It is *moksha* (salvation). For the evil it will be a purgatory of rebirth in all the 84 lakh forms of life (*joon*) before release will be granted.

However more sophisticated the Hindic theory of *samsar* may appear in comparison to the simplistic Judaic version, there is as little evidence to prove its validity as there is about Adam, Eve and the Day of Judgement. The honest truth is that we do not know where we come from, whether or not there is a divine purpose in our existence on earth; nor do we know where we will go when we die. The stark truth of our ignorance is summed up in a couplet by Shad Azimabadi:

Hikayat-e-hastee sunee
To darmiyaan say sunee
Na ibtida kee khabar hai,
Na intihaa maaloom
(What I have heard of the story of life
Is only the middle
I know not its beginning,
I know not its end.)

Under the circumstances, the only honest answer an intelligent person can give to the question 'is there a God?' is: 'I do not know.'

It may be recalled that Gautama Buddha was put the same question, not once but several times, by his chief disciple and cousin, Ananda. The Enlightened One did not deign to reply. The only conclusion we can draw from his silence is that he either wanted people to find out the answer themselves or it must be taken as an admission that he did not know it himself.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, in his scholarly commentary on the Surah-ul Fatiha, in the first of his three-volume translation and commentary on the Quran, *Tarjuman-ul Quran,* maintains that all mankind was, at one time, monotheist but with the eruption of different religious systems, departed from the concept of one Almighty God. He further maintains that the Islamic idea of the unity of Allah was the most advanced because it refused to give God shape or form and went beyond the Upanishadic definition in negatives *neti, neti* (not this, not this) but gave God positive attributes by calling him the Great Provider (Al-Razzaq), Ruler of the Universe (Rabb-ul Aalameen), Benevolent and Merciful (Al-Rahman, Al-Raheem) and the final arbiter of human actions (Malik-i-Yawmiddeen – Master of the Day of Reckoning).

The Maulana also quoted the Quran in support of all creation being attributed to God. His argument was much the same as that of the French Enlightenment writer-historian François-Marie Arouet (popularly known as Voltaire): 'We can scarcely believe that there can be a watch without a watch maker.' What neither Voltaire nor the Maulana – nor for that matter anyone else who believes that every effect must have a cause – has been able to substantiate is that if God is the cause and the world the effect, who created God in the first place? It is the primary cause, *the causa causans,* about which we know nothing.

Instead of entering into a pointless debate on whether or not God exists, it is more important to bear in mind that belief in the existence of God has little bearing on making a person a good or a bad citizen. One can be a saintly person without believing in God and a detestable villain believing in Him. In my personalized religion, there is no God.

Founders of Religions

In every religion, the founder is more revered than God. This can be ascribed to the simple reason that we know more about the founders of our faiths – be they described as prophets, messiahs, messengers, avtaars or gurus – than we know about God. They were human beings gifted with superhuman powers, which enabled them to sway the masses. With the passage of years, so many legends grew around them that they ceased to be human and became incarnations of God, His progeny, His specially chosen messengers with direct access to Him.

The classic instance of giving the messenger a higher status than God Himself is found in present-day Islam. You may make jokes about Allah, but woe betide anyone who makes the slightest insinuation against His messenger, the Prophet Mohammed: *Ba Khudaa diwaanaa Basho, ba Mohammed hoshiaar!* (Say what you like about God, but against Mohammed, beware!) This attitude explains the fate of Salman Rushdie for having written *The Satanic Verses*; the rumpus created against the eminent US economist and one-time ambassador to

India, Professor John Kenneth Galbraith, when it became known that he had given his pet cat one of the names by which Prophet Mohammed was known, Ahmed; and the burning down of the offices of *The Deccan Herald* in Bangalore because it had published a short story entitled 'Mohammed the Idiot'. The story had nothing whatsoever to do with the Prophet but was about a demented man bearing the same name.

The truth of the matter is that we have hardly any reliable historical evidence on what the founders of different religions were really like. By deifying them we have done them grave injustice. We have made them incomparably good and beyond human striving. In my personalized religion, I would give prophets, avtaars and the like their due respect as important historical personages who did good to humanity. But nothing more.

Scriptures

All scriptures are held in awe either as words of God or divinely inspired utterances. I have read them in translation many times and am astonished by the emotional fervour they arouse. The most fervent are those who never bother about the meanings of the words they chant or recite by rote. I am sure that if they bothered to read them after being translated into a language they understood, a good bit of their enthusiasm would get diluted. Without exception, their contents are unscientific – one can't blame their authors as, in their times, science was hardly advanced. In addition to being contrary to

science, they are repetitive and tediously boring. Those which enshrine codes of conduct and ethics undoubtedly serve a useful purpose in providing stability to society. Some passages in most of them are also of a high literary quality. I often quote the Bible, the Quran, the Upanishads, the Gita and the Granth Sahib to buttress my arguments. But as works of literature, they do not compare with the great classics of Kalidas, Hafiz (Khwajeh Shams al-Din Muhammad Hafiz-e-Shirazi), Saadi Shirazi, William Shakespeare, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Leo Tolstoy, Mirza Ghalib, Rabindranath Tagore, Mohammad Iqbal, Faiz Ahmed Faiz or even some lesser poets.

Mine is a personal reaction not shared by anyone else I have met. Most people are moved by their scriptures. They recite or chant them, swaying their heads in ecstasy as they do so, and claim to get peace of mind as a result. So who am I to tell them that their responses are conditioned by constant indoctrination and are a form of self-hypnosis? However, surely they cannot fault me when I maintain that the scriptures, for whatever they are worth, should be read and understood and not worshipped. This is what Guru Nanak had to say about people who recite prayers without understanding them:

Sudh na budh na akal sar
Akkhar ka bheyo na lahant
Nanak say nar asl khar
je bin gun garabh karant

(They have no comprehension, no brains in their heads
Who do not bother with the meaning of words
O Nanak! Such are real donkeys
Who vaunt their pride without having done any good.)

It is ironic that it should be the followers of Nanak, who proclaimed God to be *nirankar* (formless) and forbade the worship of idols, who treat the compilation of his and their Gurus' writing as an idol worthy of worship. They drape the Granth Sahib in silk and brocade, rouse it in the mornings and put it to rest in the evenings, take it out in processions on holy days, and have it read by professional *granthis* (priests who read the Granth Sahib) all through the night while they themselves slumber. There are fixed rates for *granthis*: novices can be hired on cheaper terms than the adept whose pronunciation is clearer.

Sikhs are not the only ones who indulge in such gross travesty of scriptural sanctity. Hindus have their own non-stop recitations; the Muslims go one step better by distributing portions of the Quran to the congregations, which all of them read at the same time so that the entire Quran is finished in less than an hour.

Places of Worship

I believe that the only legitimate place of worship is the home. However, there are religions like Islam, which

enjoin congregational namaaz in a public mosque as a religious obligation. Christians also exhort attendance in churches on Sundays and at masses. In Hindu and Sikh temples, keertans and *kathaas* (sermons) are conducted regularly; without congregations to listen to them, they would lose much of their impact.

In a country like India, which has few diversions that the poor can afford such as clubs, pubs and cinema houses, places of worship provide free, harmless entertainment in the company of like-minded people. In recent years, however, places of worship have been turned into arenas of contention and misused to propagate ideas other than those strictly religious. Some years back the most sacred site in Islam, the Kaaba, in Mecca in Saudi Arabia, was the scene of a pitched battle. In India there have been prolonged litigations over the control of mosques and temples and *waqf* (an endowment as per Islamic law) funds and trusts. In the early 1980s, the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, notably the Akal Takht, was under the control of young gun-toting men spouting hate rather than spreading the message of love that their Gurus preached. In early June 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi authorized the Indian Army to evict them, thereby deeply hurting the Sikh psyche. (This was known as Operation Bluestar.) And who can forget the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya (in Uttar Pradesh) on 6 December 1992 by Hindu fanatics, leading to large-scale riots across the country?

I am convinced that the time has come for the government to forbid the building of any more places of worship – we have more than enough of them already – and to refuse permission to use public places for religious gatherings. And whenever a place of worship becomes a bone of contention or is misused for non-religious purposes by undesirable elements, its control and management must be taken over by the government. Places of worship have created vested interests for priests, *pandas* (Hindu priests well versed in genealogy), *granthis*, imams (those who lead the prayers in a mosque) and raagis whose livelihood depends on exploiting them. This must be put an end to. My sentiments regarding places of worship are summed up in a beautiful little couplet by Bulleh Shah, a Punjabi Sufi poet:

Masjid ddhaa dey, Mandar ddhaa dey
Ddhaa dey jo kuchh ddhenda.
Ik kisey da dil na ddhavein
Rabb dilaan vicch rehndaa
(Break down the mosque, break down the temple
Break down whatever there is besides;
But never break a human heart
That is where God Himself resides.)

Prayer and Meditation

It can scarcely be disputed that we Indians, be we Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs or Parsis, spend more time

in performing religious rituals than any other people in the world. The Hindi adage *saat vaar aur aath tyohaar* – there are only seven days in a week but there are eight religious festivals – is by no means an overstatement. Count the number of religious holidays, national and sectional, then add up the number of hours people spend every day in saying their prayers and visiting temples, mosques, churches and gurudwaras, the days spent in pilgrimage to holy places, the hours taken up by *satsangs* (religious gatherings), *pravachans* (religious discourses), keertans, bhajans, *jagratas* (all-night singing of devotional songs), and so on. It will come to a staggering total. Then ask yourself whether a poor developing country like ours can afford to lose so many millions of man hours in pursuits that produce no material benefits? Also ask yourself whether strict adherence to a routine of prayer, ritual or telling the beads of a rosary makes a person into a better human being? Is it not true that even dacoits pray for success of their nefarious missions before they embark on them? And aren't the worst tax evaders and black marketeers often devoutly religious?

On rare occasions when I visited a gurudwara or a temple, I made it a point to watch people making obeisance before the Granth Sahib or their favourite God. Those who took the longest time to rub their noses on the ground were usually those who more than others craved forgiveness for having lied, stolen, fornicated and made illicit money. There is an amusing doggerel about the Potthohaaree (or Pothwari) trading community from

Rawalpindi and Campbellpur districts (now in Pakistan), known for its business acumen as well as its religiosity:

Koor vee aseen mareney aan,
Ghat vee aseen toleyney aan,
Par sacchey patshaah
Aseen naam vee teyra lainey aan.
(Lies we often tell,
Short we do often measure,
But true Lord,
Your name we also take.)

I concede that it is entirely up to any individual how he or she decides to spend his or her time. If they get peace of mind through prayer and performance of ritual, they have every right to pray as long as they want to and wave candelabras of incense and tinkle bells to their hearts' content. But what they, or anyone else, have no right to do is to impose their religiosity on other people. We as a people do this without consideration for the feelings and comforts of our fellow citizens. An instance of this total lack of concern for others is the use of loudspeakers calling for prayers (azaan from mosques) or blasting forth keertans, bhajans and *pravachans.* The craziest examples are all-night *jaagraans* that disturb the sleep of entire localities. Children are unable to concentrate on their studies, the sick unable to get rest, and if there has been a death in some household, the family members are unable to mourn in silence.

Another instance of imposing one's religious practices on others is the custom of taking out processions through crowded streets which, it cannot be denied, upsets civic life. Christians and Muslims rarely take out processions. Catholics occasionally take idols of the Madonna or Saints around the streets and Shia Muslims take out *tazias* during Moharram. But Hindus and Sikhs indulge in them as a sacred birthright. Hindu Gods and Goddesses must be periodically taken out for airing; Goddesses Kali and Durga must be taken round the streets before they are immersed in rivers; so must Ganapaty, accompanied by loud shouts of 'Ganapaty Bapa Maurya'. The mammoth procession taken out annually at Jagannath Puri brings all other activity in the city to a fullstop. Sikhs must take out processions on the birthdays and martyrdom anniversaries of their Gurus, no matter what Hindus or Muslims feel about them. It should be remembered that the most common cause of Hindu–Muslim riots are Hindu processions passing by mosques when Muslims are at prayer.

The government must take the lead in curbing unnecessary exhibitions of religious fervour. It is committed through the Constitution to inculcate a scientific outlook on life. Instead of doing that, it allows official media like All India Radio and Doordarshan to propagate religions through the broadcast of celebrations and hymn singing. Religious broadcasts take up most of the time of some TV channels.

The worst is part that the juggernaut of religion rolls

on, getting full media coverage. Preaching religion over official media is against the spirit of secularism; protests against it are ignored like the yapping of agnostic dogs. A long time back I saw an hour-long programme on Doordarshan on the birthday of a Nirankari guru. I have absolutely nothing against Nirankaris;* on the contrary, I have defended their right to propagate their beliefs despite *hukumnamas* (decrees) issued from the Akal Takht. What I found very hard to stomach were the paeans of praise showered on their young guru. There were a few sad looking foreign young ladies constipated with virtue who read their pieces; they were followed by a succession of second-rate poets reading *qaseedas* (paeans) as they would sehras at a wedding. No doubt they were paid according to their skill at *tukbandi* (rhyming). Far from being impressed, I found the entire exercise vastly amusing and laughable. If religion is to have any meaning in present-day life, it has to be treated more seriously than chanting hallelujahs to godmen or godwomen.

All this also reminds me of my visits to Canada or the States. Whenever there, I always looked forward to Sunday mornings when many TV channels were taken over by evangelists preaching love, morality and singing praises of the Almighty. I relished those programmes for a very perverse reason: I found them hilariously comic

*A sect of Sikhism that holds views different from the traditional Sikhs vis-à-vis the ten Gurus.

and laughed more than I would while watching a slapstick comedy. I saw very soulful-looking men and pretty damsels dressed in virginal white turning their eyes skywards to God (who is believed to live above the clouds) and singing hosannas with full-throated fervour. The greatest 'comedians' of those god-plays used to be Reverends Jimmy Lee Swaggart and Jim Bakker. Unfortunately, both men who preached sexual morality and martial fidelity were caught pants down consorting with prostitutes.

A modern fad, which has gained widespread acceptance amongst the educated and semi-educated who wish to appear secular, is the practice of meditation. They proclaim with an air of smug superiority: '*Main mandir-vandir nahin jaata, bas meditate karta hoon.*' (I don't go to temples or other such places, I only meditate.) The exercise involves sitting in the lotus pose (*padmasana*), regulating one's breathing and emptying the mind to prevent it from 'jumping about like a monkey' from one (thought) branch to another. This intense concentration apparently awakens the *kundalini* (the serpent coiled at the base of the spine), which then travels upwards through *chakras* (circles) till it reaches its destination in the cranium. Then the *kundalini* is fully *jaagrit* (roused) and the person is assumed to have reached his or her goal.

What does meditation achieve? The usual answer is 'peace of mind'. If you further ask 'and what does peace of mind achieve?' you will get no answer because there is none. Peace of mind is a sterile concept, which produces nothing. The exercise may be justified as therapy for those with disturbed minds or those suffering from hypertension, but there is no evidence to prove that it enhances creativity. On the contrary, it can be established by statistical data that all the great works of art, literature, science and music were works of highly agitated minds, at times on the verge of collapse. Allama Iqbal's short prayer is pertinent:

Khuda tujhey kisee toofan say aashna kar dey
Key terey beher kee maujon mein iztiraab naheen
(May God bring a storm in your life,
There is no agitation in the waves of your life's ocean.)

A word that constantly appears in the Allama's writings is *talaatum,* restlessness of the mind, as the sine qua non of creativity.

I would like to sum up all I have said about prayer, ritual and meditation in a slogan I have coined as a motto for modern India:

Work is worship,
but worship is not work.

My new religion for India would be primarily based on the work ethic. We have an apt motto, which needs to be put into effect: *aaraam haraam hai* (rest is forbidden). However, leisure time to recoup energy to resume work, which yields material benefits, ought to be provided. We must not waste time because time is precious. There is a Hadith (sayings of Prophet Mohammed) in which he is said to have exhorted (which loosely translated means): Do not waste time; time is God. We must reject the concepts of *sanyas* (retirement) and *vanaprastha* (taking to the woods; i.e., renouncing everything) and continue to labour till we are physically able to do so. Leading idle lives on inherited or unearned incomes is as bad as being a beggar. Laws must be passed to limit the right to leave property to descendants and begging must be outlawed. Guru Nanak emphasized the work ethic in three commandments:

Kirt karo,
naam japo,
vand chako
(work,
worship
and give in charity)

Note the order of priorities. In another hymn he wrote:

Khat ghaal
kicch hatthon dey,
Nanak raah pacchaney sey
(He who earns,
and gives some of it away,
O Nanak, he has found the right way.)

He or she who does not contribute materially to society has no right to claim any benefits from it.

There are some professions, much practised in our country, which contribute nothing to society but instead do a great deal of harm to it. The most popular of them is forecasting the future through astrology, casting horoscopes, palmistry, crystal ball gazing and deciphering ancient texts like the Bhrigu Samhita and the Sau Saakhee. Of these, astrology is the most widespread and believed in as much by the highest placed as by the masses. Prime ministers, chief ministers, other ministers, governors, bureaucrats and businessmen regularly perform tantric rites and practise black magic ostensibly to overcome the influence of evil stars. New ventures are undertaken only after making sure that the stars are in their proper positions.

In India, astrology has religious sanction. It must therefore be exorcised from the Indian religion of the future. That it is totally unscientific is beyond dispute. Astronomy is a science; astrology is not. What superstition is to religion, astrology is to astronomy – the illegitimate offspring of sick minds.

There are innumerable instances in our history highlighting how battles were lost because our commanders, instead of using their common sense, consulted astrologers about the most auspicious time to commence the attack. There is no evidence whatsoever to prove that marriages made after matching horoscopes do better than those consummated without consulting them. I know of the case of a leading astrologer who wrote a weekly column, 'What the Stars Foretell', for the *Hindustan Times* who arranged his daughter's marriage after reading her and her future bridegroom's horoscopes. The marriage lasted only a few months. Belief in astrology has assumed menacing proportions and, unless banned by legal enactment, will continue to govern the lives of people to their detriment.

The ultimate purpose of religion should be to abstain from causing hurt to all living things – human beings, flaura and fauna – as far as possible. Ahimsa Paramo Dharma, i.e., non-violence is the paramount religion. When it comes to humans, we have to learn to avoid hurting them. Writes Hafiz (the fourteenth-century Sufi poet):

Mai khor, mimbar ba-soz, O aatish andar Kaaba zan
Sakin-e-butkhana baash, O mardam azaari mekun
(Drink wine, tear up the holy book, set fire to the house of God

Go make your house in a temple full of idols;
You may do all these but do not hurt a man.)

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, a thirteenth-century Sufi poet, echoed the same sentiment:

Dile badast aavar keh haj-e-akbar ast
az hazaaraan Kaaba, yak-e-dil behtarast
(Go into your hearts, it is the greatest pilgrimage
One heart is better than a thousand Kaabas.)

I am not sure whether we are yet in a position to outlaw the killing of animals for food because, in large parts of the world, human beings survive only by eating meat, fish and eggs. But this does not justify cruelty to animals or killing them for sport. Fortunately, in India, hunting of animals has been banned.

Our new religion should have a vision of the future and should aim to provide measures that do not put the lives of the generations to come in jeopardy. Our population is rising at a rate suicidal to our future. If we continue to breed in the reckless way we are doing, we will continue to be short of food, clothing, housing, educational institutions and hospitals and our cities, towns and villages will fester with slums. Family planning must be made an integral part of our religion. We must disenfranchise parents who have more than two children and forbid them from holding elective offices. We must also make sterilization of both parents on the birth of their second

child compulsory. An undertaking to do so could be made a part of the vows taken at marriage. We have no right to overload an already overpopulated country.

The preservation of our environment must also become an essential part of our religion. We have the example of the Bishnoi community, which rigorously forbids the cutting of trees and killing of animals or birds. We have to go further. Felling of trees must be forbidden. The Hindu-Sikh custom of cremating the dead on funeral pyres must be stopped forthwith. There is nothing in the Hindu and Sikh religions requiring burning of the dead with wood. Many Hindu communities in South India bury their dead. For instance: C. N. Annadurai and M. G. Ramachandran (both former chief ministers of Tamil Nadu, who died on 3 February 1969 and 24 December 1987, respectively) were buried. Jain *munis* (monks) too are buried. The amount of wood that is consumed in cremations is horrendous. It has been calculated that on an average more than one crore Indians die every year, of whom 80 per cent are Hindus or Sikhs. Roughly two quintals of wood is consumed in cremating one dead body, making a staggering total of millions of quintals of wood consumed every year. We are destroying our forests to dispose of our dead. The answer is not electric or gas crematoria but Hindu-Sikh cemeteries with the proviso that no tombstones are erected on graves and the land is returned to agriculture every five years. The earth is in need of rejuvenation.

Humans, when they die, should be returned to the earth from which, according to most religions, they emanate.

The use of wood for construction and furniture also needs to be severely curtailed. We have now enough synthetic substitutes to make all the buildings and furniture we need. Reafforestation and greening of our land must be given top priority. They can be easily included as a part of our religious obligations as well as become a compulsory component of our educational system. At every religious ceremony, be it the thread ceremony, baptism, marriage or death, provision should be made for planting a certain number of trees. Charities given in memory of departed souls should be devoted to planting of forests. Students passing their school-leaving or degree exams should not be given their certificates unless they provide evidence of having planted a required number of trees and seen them grow in good health for a specified number of years.

Polluting catchment areas, rivers and lakes should be condemned as irreligious acts. The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which make the land sterile and destroy bird and insect life, must also be severely curtailed. The earth must be considered sacred as must the lives of birds, beasts and insects. All ancient religions have something to say about the preservation of the environment as a religious duty. All we have to do is highlight these aspects and emphasize them with greater vigour.

Let me sum up my faith in a time-worn cliché: a good life is the only religion. The nineteenth-century American political leader and orator during the Golden Age of Free Thought, Robert G. Ingersoll, who was noted for his broad range of culture put it in more felicitous language: 'Happiness is the only good; the place to be happy is here; the time to be happy is now; the way to be happy is to help others.' One of America's greatest writers Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850–1919), whose prolific prose and poetry are a tour de force of optimism, put the same in plainer words:

> So many gods, so many creeds, so many paths
> that wind and wind.
> When just the art of being kind is all that the
> sad world needs.

In fine, let me clarify my ideas of God, religion and moral values.

It is evident that all religious systems have failed us. They have generated more misunderstanding and hatred than love and friendship. However, since some people need some sort of system of beliefs, we have to evolve a new religion that avoids the pitfalls of outworn creeds, of which we have had a bitter experience.

The process has to be dual: first wipe the slate clean and then start afresh to write a new message. What we need to

demolish are five established pillars of most religious systems: God, prophets, scriptures, prayer and places of worship.

To my way of thinking, it is not very important whether or not people believe in God, or how they visualize Him – as one, a trinity or in multiplicity; as an old, long-bearded Jehovah, in the shape of an idol, *nirguna* (without attributes) or *sarguna* (with attributes), or as an abstraction. God simply does not matter.

Founder-prophets of religions matter a great deal to people, but instead of worshipping them, they should be regarded as 'historical characters' who brought about revolutionary changes in society.

Likewise, I would treat religious scriptures as historical writings and judge them on their literary qualities. They should not become subject matters of prayers. Places of worship should be converted to schools, colleges or hospitals or simply preserved as historical monuments.

We must not erase the past unless we have something positive to replace it with: mental vacuum can have disastrous consequences. In my outline of a future religion man replaces God. Fellow humans should be our top priority. You don't have to worship them; only refrain from hurting them either physically or mentally.

I would place the care of all living creatures next to humans. We have no right to deprive them of life for our own sustenance. I subscribe to the Jain concept of Ahimsa Paramo Dharma and would make a strong plea for vegetarianism.

I would not include other items of food or drink

amongst the don'ts. What an adult consumes of his or her own free will – be it alcohol, narcotics or tobacco – is entirely his or her own business even if it does him or her harm or kills him or her.

I would also replace reciting prayers by doing good work. Instead of chanting mantras or reading scriptures, every person should set aside at least one hour of the day for social service from which he or she derives no personal benefit but is beneficial for his or her fellow beings or animals. It should be *nishkama seva* (selfless service): teaching children, tending the sick or the handicapped, cleaning drains. Or whatever.

And finally before retiring for the night, everyone should spend at least 15 minutes entirely with himself or herself to review what he or she has done that day. I would suggest instead of meditating you should look at your own image in a mirror, look squarely into the reflection of your own eyes and ask yourself: 'Did I hurt anyone today? If so, I must make amends tomorrow. Did I do anything to lighten another's burden, sorrow or pain today? If not I must double my efforts tomorrow.' It is not very easy to face one's own conscience, but it is the ultimate test which one must pass. For me this test was beautifully worded by William Shakespeare in *Hamlet*:

> This above all: To thine own self be true
> And it must follow as the night the day
> Thou canst not then be false to any man

I suggest that on religious festivals after performing expected rituals like going to temples, mosques, churches or gurudwaras, people should spend a little time – no more than half an hour – alone in silence and ask themselves: 'What does my religion really means to me?' Hindus could do this on Ramnavami or Diwali, Muslims on Eid-ul-Fitr, Christians on Christmas, Sikhs on the birth anniversary of the founder of Sikhism – Guru Nanak.

On Guru Nanak's birth anniversary (21 November 2010) I tried to answer the question: How much of a Sikh am I? And drew up a list of answers. Although I do not practise my religious rituals, I have a sense of belonging to the Sikh community. Whatever happens to it, is of concern to me and I speak up or write about it.

I think that speculating about where we come from and where we go after we die is a waste of time. No one has the foggiest idea. What we should be concerned about is what we do in our lives on earth. I have imbibed what I think are the basics of Sikhism as I see it now. I regard truth to be the essence of religion and a must for life. As Guru Nanak said:

Suchchon orey sab ko
Ooper Suchh Aachaar
(Truth above all
above truth truthful conduct.)

I do my best not to lie because lying requires cunning to cover up the lies you have told before. Truth does not require brains.

As mentioned earlier, earn your own living and share some of it with others, said Guru Nanak.

I try not to hurt others' feelings. If I have done so, I try to cleanse my conscience by tendering an apology before the year is out.

I have also inmbibed the motto: '*Chardi Kala*' – 'ever remain in buoyant spirits, never say die'. Ponder over it. Try it out.

Chapter Two

Religion, Tolerance, Revenge and Miracles

Logic has never been the strong point of any established religion. Nor has there been room for accommodation of a different point of view in the minds of religious bigots.

All religions have a few words believed to have powerful protective and curative potential. It is difficult to unravel the mystery behind them. In Hinduism we have the mystic syllable Om or Aum. It is chanted in its elongated form and believed to have the entire range of sounds in it. Intoned by itself or in combination with one of the names of God, Hari, as Hari Om, it does produce a soothing effect on jangled nerves and brings peace of mind. The Sikh equivalent Ek Onkar (there is one God) is derived from it, but does not enjoy the same popularity among Sikhs as does Om among Hindus.

The Muslims do not have any single word to match Om, but they do have some terms, which, like Allah-o-Akbar, are repeated while telling the beads of a rosary. They also recite select passages of the Quran, which are believed to be more powerful than others. The most frequently quoted is of course the opening lines of the holy book, Al-Fatiha:

> All Praise Be to Allah
> Lord of all the worlds,
> Most beneficent, ever merciful,
> King of the Day of judgement,
> You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn
> for help.
> Guide us (O Lord) to the path that is straight,

The path of those you have blessed,
Not of those who have earned Your anger,
Nor [of] those who have gone astray.

(Ahmad Ali)

Next to the Fatiha, the second most popular verse is the Ayat-ul Qursi, the throne verse:

God: There is no God but He,
The living, sustaining, ever self-subsisting.
Neither does somnolence affect Him nor sleep.
To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth, and who can intercede with Him except by His leave?
Known to Him is all that is present before men and what is hidden in time past and time future, and not even a little of His knowledge can they grasp except what He will.
His seat extends over heavens and the earth,
And He tires not protecting them
He alone is all high and supreme.
There is no compulsion in matter of faith.
Distinct is the way of guidance now from error.
He who turns away from the forces of evil and believes in God will surely hold fast to a handle that is strong and unbreakable,
For God hears all and knows everything.

(Ahmad Ali)

The Ayat-ul Qursi is embossed on medallions and worn by Muslim ladies attached to their necklaces. It is also the most popularly quoted verse on Muslim graves. The third in popularity are lines from Sura Yaseen. This *sura* is also a favourite citation on mausoleums. On the entrance gate of the Taj Mahal, it is reproduced in full.

Amongst Hindus, the mantra regarded as the most powerful is the Gayatri from the Yajur Veda. To me it appears as an invocation to the sun and I cannot decipher any hidden meaning in it. Years back, I had turned to my one-time Hindi teacher (I studied Hindi only for two years before I turned to Urdu) for an explanation. Dr Dashrath Ojha, who retired as a professor of Hindi and Sanskrit in Delhi University, was kind enough to illumine my mind. I share his explanation. First the mantra:

OM
Bhur bhuva swah
tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah prachodayat.

Literally, the mantra means:

> Let us meditate on God, His glorious attributes, who is the basis of everything in this universe as its Creator, who is fit to be worshipped as omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and self-

> existent conscious being, who removes all ignorance and impurities from the mind and purifies and sharpens our intellect .... May God enlighten our intellect.

Dr Ojha advised that, in order to comprehend the full meaning of the mantra, the reciter must pause at the end of each line and let the meaning sink in.

After the incantation Om is *Bhur bhuva swah*, meaning on earth (*bhur*), in the sky (*bhuva*) and in the heavens above the sun (*swah*). *Tat* stands for God, *savitur* God as the creator and the power that sustains creation; *varenyam* indicates that God is transcendent; *bhargo* that He is the light that dispels darkness and purifies impurities; *devasya* that He is the light behind all lights and the bestower of happiness; *dhimahi* is the exhortation to meditate on Him; *dhiyo yo* stands for intellect; *nah* for ours; and *prachodayat* is the prayer that God may direct our energies towards good deeds, thoughts and conduct.

According to Dr Ojha, the purpose of reciting the Gayatri mantra is as follows:

> As this mantra invokes an integrated form of endless and 'beginningless' God, all limitations which are normally found in the worship of a personal God or Goddess are totally absent in its goal. As such it helps to clean our mind of its impurities in totality as and when it expands in tune with the meaning of its repetition. Thus

gradually, this mantra helps us to possess an enlightened intellect. This enables us to know more and more about God in meditation and the mysteries of nature through intellect when it is directed towards objects. This also makes us maintain constant awareness of the very basis of our existence. As this mantra directs the imagination of the mind to a limitless state, it strikes at the very root of our basic desires and instincts, not necessarily of this present life, but also many past lives.

There is something inherent in all religious systems that makes them intolerant towards others. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable when a section of believers break away from the main body to recognize subprophets of their own with their separate scriptures, places of worship and social organizations. No religious system is known to have escaped the cancer of intolerance.

Hinduism, which makes lofty claims of being the most tolerant of religions (the caste system notwithstanding), was unable to contain itself either against Jainism or Buddhism, which broke away from it. When Hindusim came back into its own, it wreaked terrible vengeance against Jains and Buddhists and virtually wiped them out as separate communities.

Judaism was unable to accept the emergence of Jesus Christ and denounced Him as a heretic. Christians never forgave the Jews for what they did to their Messiah and continue to persecute them to this day. Then Christianity splintered into many churches: Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Protestant and dozens of others. Catholics and Protestants have waged wars against each other and perpetrated massacres of each others' populations. When Islam rose out of paganism, Judaism and Christianity, Muslims suffered the same fate. They repaid the Jews and the Christians in the same way.

Smaller religious communities like the Sikhs did not escape this malaise either. While they were able to make adjustments with the numerically more powerful Hindus and Muslims, they could not tolerate subcommunities that broke away from the Sikh mainstream.

Two groups, the Namdharis and the Nirankaris, which recognized gurus of their own, were ostracized. Neither of them is allowed inside gurudwaras and no *amritdhari* (a Sikh who has been baptized as a Khalsa by taking *amrit* or nectar) may have matrimonial relationship with them. Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale (see Chapter 4 for details) turned the wiping out of Nirankaris into an article of faith. Their sacred books, Avtar Bani and Yugpurush, were condemned as derogatory of the Sikh Gurus (I was unable to locate anything offensive in them) and a Nirankari leader, Baba Gurbachan Singh, was murdered in April 1980 in Delhi.

From the outside, Islam gives the impression of being

a unified, monolithic religious group. It is nothing of the sort. It broke into two immediately after the death of Prophet Mohammed. The larger section accepted the succession of the first three caliphs: Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab and Uthman ibn Affan. A smaller group (Shias) regarded them as usurpers and recognized only Hazrat Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, as the true successor. Ever since, the Islamic world has been split into the Shias and Sunnis. Their hostility continues to this day. While the Sunnis have not had many breakaway groups and only follow different schools of jurisprudence, the Shias have virtually dozens of subgroups with their own mosques, rituals and graveyards.

Muslim intolerance towards breakaway groups has been noticeably fierce, especially with respect to the Bahais and the Quadianis. The Bahai faith is regarded as 'deeply heretical' in Iran and, after the 1979 revolution (led by Ayatollah Khomeini) that led to the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, known popularly as the Shah of Iran, the new government reversed 'the Shah's policy of toleration'. According to an official circular:

> ... in view of your not being a follower of one of the official and recognized religions of the country, you were thus dismissed from the Ministry of Education; we state the following: The Ministry of Education, which has come into being only through the justice of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the blood and martyrdom

of thousands of Muslims, men and women, cannot tolerate, like the previous regime, the existence of followers of the Bahai sect in its Educational Unit, and in this way defile and deviate the minds and thoughts of innocent students ... the holy threshold of education should not be left to people like yourself, who are against the best interests of Islam .... In conclusion, I would like to remind you that the employment of Iranians who are not followers of recognized religions, such as Muslims, Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians, in Government Offices is against the law. Therefore your dismissal according to the existing law is a minimum punishment. No doubt the maximum punishment will befall those who employed you – who very shortly will be tried in the Islamic Revolutionary Court ...

During the reign of Ayatollah Khomeini, hundreds of Bahais were executed in Iran for no crime except that of being Bahais.

Pakistanis did not lag behind in their fervour in persecuting Quadianis. This group, which branched out in 1889 under the leadership of Mirza Ghulam Ahmed of Quadian (now in Indian Punjab), has done more to spread the message of Islam in Africa and Europe than any other set of Muslim missionaries. It has also produced some very distinguished men like Chaudhary Zaffarullah

Khan, judge of the Supreme Court and later foreign minister of Pakistan, and Professor Abdus Salam, the only Pakistani winner of the Nobel Prize (for physics in 1979). But the Quadianis have, nevertheless, been the target of Muslim fundamentalism. Their township Rabwah, along the Jhelum, witnessed a lot of violence before the country's highest judiciary declared Ahmediyyas (Quadianis) to be non-Muslims. They are not allowed to call for prayers from the minarets of their mosques and not even allowed to describe themselves as Muslims. They have declared themselves a minority.

The only point of contention is that the ulema (a body of Muslim scholars) maintains that Islam recognizes Mohammed as the last of the Prophets (Khatmun Nabi) and anyone who accepts a successor is a heretic. The Ahmediyyas strenuously deny that they ever question Mohammed's singular Prophethood and look upon their Mirza Sahib and his successors simply as guides. This is not good enough for the Pakistani ulema.

The fact that the Aga Khan is regarded as a living God by his Ismaili followers and that there are innumerable Muslim sects based on worship of peers is considered beside the point. Logic has never been the strong point of any established religion. Nor has there been room for accommodation of a different point of view in the minds of religious bigots.

In early June 1984, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered the Indian Army into the holiest shrine of the Sikhs: the Golden Temple at Amritsar (see also Chapter 1). Her two Sikh bodyguards (Beant Singh and Satwant Singh) avenged the insult by killing her on 31 October 1984. (Beant Singh was killed by other security forces and Satwant Singh was arrested.) Since Sikhs had killed Mrs Gandhi, a section of Hindus avenged her murder by killing thousands of Sikhs. One of Mrs Gandhi's assassins (Satwant Singh) and his accomplice (Kehar Singh) were sentenced to be hanged to death. As a consequence, 'Khalistani' terrorists took revenge by hanging a few innocent Hindus. (Some Sikhs wanted a separate nation, which was to be called 'Khalistan'.)

The point is that the spirit of revenge is deeply ingrained in the human psyche. It is not an animal instinct because animals do not kill to take revenge; they do so only in self-defence or for obtaining food.

All religious systems have tried in their own ways to exorcize the spirit of revenge from the human mind. Some have achieved notable successes in this direction by adopting penal codes that forbid people from settling their scores themselves and making punishment for crime the business of the state.

This significant step was taken in the transition from the Old to the New Testament. Judaism sanctioned 'an

eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. In the Sermon on the Mount, which forms the most important part of the New Testament, Jesus is quoted as preaching: 'Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man shall sue thee at the law, and take away the coat, let him have the cloak also.' (Matthew: 5:39-40.)

One must be fair to Judaism. Although it sanctioned retaliation in equal measure, it did not justify a person taking the law into his or her own hands. It was not for the individual whose eye had been pierced or tooth knocked out to execute revenge but to lodge a complaint and submit to a court's judgement whether or not the person who did him or her harm was to be punished in the same manner or compensated by a sum of money. 'Love thy neighbour as thyself' was also an integral part of the Judaic faith.

Islam, which took a great deal from Judaism and Christianity, made a similar compromise between crime and punishment. It accepted the principle of eye for an eye, but allowed compensation in place of similar punishment as legitimate and elevated forgiveness to the pedestal of supreme virtue.

Badla or revenge has never been sanctioned by any of the religious systems of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism or Sikhism. Jainism made ahimsa (non-violence) *paramo* dharma – the prime duty – and even forbade killing of

animals for food. Likewise, the Buddha preached non-violence in face of violence. Sikhism of the first nine Gurus, as compiled in the Granth Sahib, also preaches the moral superiority of turning the other cheek over retaliation. Amongst the most quoted are lines from the Muslim divine Baba Fareed (Fareedudin Ganjshakar: 1173–1266):

Jo tain maara mukkian
Tina na maaren ghum
Apanery ghar jai kay
Payr tina dey chum
(Those who hit you with their fists
Do not turn and hit them back;
Seek them out in their homes
And kiss their feet.)

Guru Gobind Singh, the last of the Gurus, turned the Sikhs into a militant fraternity and exhorted *dharmayudha* – the battle of righteousness – in face of unwarranted aggression. But he did not justify a person taking the law into his or her own hands. And he sanctioned the use of force by a people only after all other means had been tried and had failed; it was only then that they were to draw the sword. In a memorable passage, he wrote: 'I came into the world charged with the duty to uphold the right in every place, to destroy sin and evil. Holy men, know it well in your hearts that the only reason I took birth was to see that righteousness may

flourish: that the good may live and tyrants be torn out by their roots.'

There are other aspects of the spirit of revenge that need to be considered. There may be some justification for wanting to avenge the wrong done to you by paying the wrongdoer in the same coin. To wit:

Tit for tat;
Remember that;
You killed my dog,
I'll kill your cat.

You may not rest in peace till you have maimed or murdered the man who raped your child. Such levelling of scores has its own logic. But when vengeance is sought to be extended to people of the wrongdoer's caste or community, its implications can be horrifying. This unfortunately has become a regular pattern of our lives. When one man desecrates a place of worship, we not only desecrate his people's places of worship, but also seek to avenge ourselves against his clan or community. The sickening incidents of communal riots bear testimony to this extended spirit of revenge. And often we extend the domain of vengeance against the entire society by organizing bandhs and gheraos, derailing trains, burning buses and causing damage to public property.

It would be naive to expect that religious sermons will curb the desire to seek revenge. Forgiveness is a very

rare commodity. There are not many in the world who, like Jesus Christ on the cross, would say of his tormentors: 'Lord, forgive them for they know not what they do.' However hard it may be to forgive the wrongdoer, it is the only antidote to revenge.

British humorist and writer Israel Zangwill has a lovely short story about how a place can acquire sanctity and people who have blind faith at times benefit from it. It is about a remote village in eastern Poland where lived a poor Jewish woodcutter with his young wife. Near their home lived a middle-aged woman (a widow) with her son who had been born paralytic. She had spent whatever she had having him treated, but it had been of no avail.

Came Christmas and the village and the surrounding country was under a layer of snow. The woodcutter had made a little money selling firewood and was looking forward to eating a square meal after a long while. Early on the morning of Christmas Day, the woodcutter's wife went out into the woods to pick holly and mistletoe to decorate her home.

After she had gathered what she wanted, she came by a pond frozen with ice. It occurred to her that she had not had a bath for many days and her husband, though Jewish, might wish to celebrate the occasion in other ways. She took off her clothes, smashed the ice and jumped into the icy water. No sooner had she done so, she heard

human voices approaching. She got out of the pool, gathered her clothes and ran naked into the woods towards her home.

The human voices belonged to two farmers who happened to be out with their guns to see if they could get a wild hare or some other game for their Christmas dinner. They saw the figure of a young girl come out of the icy pool and disappear in the snows. They came back to the village and spread the story that they had seen the Virgin Mary. Soon the entire village was out to see the pond. All the signs of someone having bathed in it were there. Surely, if the Virgin had come there, the water must be blest.

The middle-aged widow heard of the story. She picked up her paralysed son in her arms and hurried to the pond. With full faith that a miracle would happen, she ducked her son in the chilly water. The shock did to the boy what medicines and therapy had failed to do. He was cured of his paralysis.

The story of the miracle cure spread like wildfire. The trickle of pilgrims became a regular stream. The Jewish woodcutter and his wife made good business. They filled small phials with water from the pond and sold it at high prices for its medicinal properties. The site was examined by a representative of the Pope who confirmed that the Holy Virgin had indeed visited the place and many people had been cured of their ailments by drinking the water. A huge cathedral was built in the village and it soon became a place of pilgrimage. The one to benefit

the most was the poor Jewish woodcutter who, through the sale of millions of bottles full of 'sacred' water, became a millionaire.

Zangwill's story is, of course, apocryphal. But it does contain an element of truth insofar as people who have blind faith in miracles are known to have miraculous recoveries. I am not sure of the origin of Lourdes in France, but everyone who goes there will see innumerable crutches abandoned by those who could not walk as evidence of their having been healed. Millions go to Lourdes for treatment. Perhaps a handful, already on the verge of being healed, get healed. But they perpetuate the legend that such miracles are possible.

Belief in miracles exists in every religious system. The outstanding example is the Hindu's belief in the purifying qualities of the waters of the river Ganga and various 'sacred' tanks such as those at Kurukshetra (in Haryana) and Pushkar near Ajmer (in Rajasthan). The 'holy dip' is a uniquely Hindu-Sikh phenomenon. Stellar constellations determine the more auspicious days like the Kumbhs when the ritual bath is said to be more beneficial. Some holy baths are believed to even wipe out all sins committed in the past.

Guru Nanak proclaimed: 'I have no miracle save the name of the Lord.' Despite that, many miracles have become attached to his name and the places he visited.

A fresh-water spring, not far from Rawalpindi (now in Pakistan), has an overhanging rock with the imprint of a human palm dug into it. The faithful believe it is the palm of Guru Nanak as he stretched out his hand to stop a boulder loosened by an envious Muslim *peer* so that it would fall on him. The gurudwara that has come up on the site is known as 'Panja Sahib'. There is an annual pilgrimage of Sikhs from all over the world to this gurudwara.

There is another place in the Himalayas where there is a tree growing the *reetha* fruit, which is normally very bitter. The fruit of this particular tree is very sweet because the Guru sat under its shade. It is no use telling devout Sikhs that there is, in fact, a botanical species of *reetha* that is sweet.

As with the Hindus, so with the Sikhs, waters of temple tanks are endowed with sanctity. Bathing in 'the pool of nectar', from which Amritsar derives its name, is de rigueur for all pilgrims. In addition, water from a sacred spot such as Har Ki Pauri in Haridwar as well as from behind the central shrine of the Golden Temple is drunk with reverence and collected in bottles to take home for relatives. The same reverence is accorded to the spring water of Gurudwara Bangla Sahib in New Delhi. Here, the infant Guru, Har Krishan, lived for a while before he succumbed to small pox.

It can hardly be maintained that belief in miracles is an integral part of religion. Many devoutly religious people scoff at them as spurious accretions to beguile the

superstitious and the stupid. Indeed, a case could be made out to ban propagation of miracles for the harm they do to gullible people. And in such propagation our film industry leads the way. I can list here a number of films that go on to become superhits and earn millions by just exploiting the theme of miracles or at least inserting a scene or two. For example, remember Manmohan Desai's *Amar, Akbar, Anthony* (1977) where, in a particular scene, Nirupa Roy (the mother of the three heroes) gets back her eyesight at a temple of Shirdi Sai Baba? Over the years, every big or small producer and director has exploited the common man's belief in religious miracles. I recall that in the year 1969, producers Ram Singh and Pannalal Maheshwari made a film made called *Nanak Naam Jahaz Hai* (the name of Nanak is a ship, to take you across the waters of life) directed by Ram Maheshwari. The theme was that of a young man who has lost his sight in an accident. When all medical treatment failed, he undertook a pilgrimage to the major gurudwaras. Ultimately, at the Hari Mandir at Amritsar, a divine light came out of the temple and restored his vision. What a success story it was! Millions of Sikhs and Hindus saw this film many times over. In fact, there were reports that cinema halls screening the film had become more of pilgrimage centres with hordes of *jhathas* (groups) from villages and towns visiting them! While watching the movie, people would even throw money towards the screen while shouting in exultation: *'Jo Bole So Nihal Sat Sri Akal.'* The film makers made millions. And spread a

message of crass superstition. I could go on and on with a list of such examples not only from the film world but also from the television serial world. Indeed, miracles are the biggest money-spinners of institutionalized religion.

Chapter Three

The Beauty of the Quran

The Quran is one of the world's greatest scriptures and some of its prose is as powerful as that of the Old Testament .... Numerous passages can be read for their moral messages or their literary excellence. Several of the shorter suras [chapters] *have powerful poetic imagery. And the Quran has lot a lot of music in it.*

Many years back on a bright Sunday morning, a couple of bearded maulvis (Islamic scholars) presented me with a Punjabi rendering of the Holy Quran by Gyani Ibadullah, a Sikh convert to Islam. They were Ahmediyya missionaries who had devoted their lives to *tableegh* – spreading the message of the Quran. It occurred to me that except for passages quoted in some books and in biographies of Prophet Mohammed, I had never read the Quran from cover to cover. The only scriptures I had gone through completely, apart from the Granth Sahib, were some of the smaller Upanishads and the Gita, which takes less than an hour to read.

I have no great enthusiasm for religious scriptures. Though I had to read many of them during my short tenure as a visiting lecturer with the Department of Religion at Princeton University and later at Swarthmore College (both in the USA), I find religious classics somewhat repetitive and boring. And yet, when I meet people who spend many hours of their day reading their scriptures and see how profoundly they are moved hearing them recited, I feel I am missing something very precious. Perhaps it is the music of the words in which they are couched. This is certainly true of the Sanskrit of the Gita, much of the Santhbasha used by Guru Arjun and the Arabic of the Quran.

In fact, not many Muslims bother to read translations of their holy book or understand its message: they simply memorize a few passages in its original Arabic to be able to pray. Non-Muslims are even less familiar with the Quran. And, more often than not, they are inhibited by preconceived prejudices from studying it. It is one of the world's greatest scriptures and some of its prose is as powerful as that of the Old Testament. In the words of Dr Samuel Johnson (the renowned British lexicographer): 'There are two objects of curiosity – the Christian world and the Mohammedan world – all the rest may be considered Barbarous.' His views were not shared by other European scholars. Dante Alighieri, Voltaire and Thomas Carlyle had many unkind things to say about the Quran without having read it. None of them knew Arabic.

The earliest known translation of the Quran into the English language is *The Alcoran of Mahomet*, published in 1649 by one Alexander Ross, who translated it from a French edition. However, it is George Sale's 1734 edition titled *The Al Koran of Mohammed,* based on a Latin translation, which was claimed to be the first 'scholarly' translation. This most widely read English translation is available even today. The first English translation of the holy book from Arabic – *Selections from the Koran* – by E. W. Lane appeared in 1843. Subsequently, many others were published till Marmaduke Pickthall, a convert to Islam, published his *Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (published by Knopf) in 1930. Pickthall not only admitted that the Quran was untranslatable (Islamicists,

including Professor H. A. R. Gibbs, are agreed on this point) but went on to say: 'No holy scripture can be fairly presented by one who disbelieves its importance and its message.' He specially referred to its emotive quality: 'The very sounds of which move men to tears of ecstasy.'

The gift of the Gurumukhi translation of the Quran impelled me to pick up the English translations that I had on my book shelves. I recall that over 70 years ago, I had dedicated one full month to reading the Quran and picked up Pickthall's version. I had struggled with it with the help of a maulvi in Lahore who recited the original while I followed the translation. I didn't get beyond the first three *suras* (chapters) when, for some reason, my mentor gave up the exercise. It was the same with A. J. Arberry's translation. I gave up after I had gone through half of the text. I did not rate Arberry very high as a translator because, in his anxiety for accuracy, he robbed words of their music. And the Quran has a lot of music in it.

It was Abdullah Yusuf Ali's version with commentaries that rekindled my ambition to read the holy book from cover to cover. Every morning I switched on to Radio Pakistan, listened to the *qari* (one who recites the Quran) recite four *ayats* (verses) and followed the recitation with the Arabic text printed alongside the translation. Then I

acquired N. J. Dawood's *The Koran.* Dawood, an Iraqi, had settled in London and translated many Arabic classics including *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights.* His translation of the Quran was first published in 1916. Since then it has been reprinted numerous times and is probably the most widely read translation of the holy book. My only grievance against his otherwise eminently readable rendering has been that he changed the order in which the verses appeared in the authenticated version. This confused me because I wanted to read it in the same order as Muslims do. Then I acquired Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's *Tarjuman-ul Quran* (translation of the Quran), published in three volumes in 1930, as also Ahmad Ali's *The Qur'an – A Contemporary Translation*, published by Oxford University Press in 1984. (I shall come to Azad's edition towards the end of this chapter.)

There are many good reasons for reading the Quran. One is that it means more to Muslims than other scriptures mean to people who follow them. Muslims are people of this one book, whereas other religions have a multiplicity of sacred texts. There is an old Latin saying *Caveab homine unius libri*: Beware of the man of one book. We have hundreds of millions of Muslims scattered over the globe who, even if they have read no other book, are familiar with the contents of the Quran. This single-minded devotion to a single book may have given rise to the

apocryphal story about Muslim conquerors burning the library of Alexandria, who declared: 'If these other books agree with our Quran, they are superfluous and should be destroyed. And if they disagree with it, they are wrong and deserve to be destroyed.' Or words to that effect. If you wish to know what Muslim values of life are, you must read the Quran.

The Quran has no known author. Muslims believe that it was revealed by Allah to Prophet Mohammed in bits and pieces over a period of years. These revelations were memorized by his followers, written down on palm leaves, camel hide, stones and bones. An authorized version was compiled some years after the Prophet's death. The copyright of the Quran vests in Allah who is its real author and not with the Prophet who only published it by word of mouth. How this happened was quite dramatic. But before we come to that, we should know something about the Prophet himself.

Mohammed was the posthumous child of Abdullah of the Qureish tribe and was born in Makka (Mecca) in A.D. 570. His mother died while he was still a child and he was brought up by his grandfather and his uncle. He grew to be a handsome man with a dynamic personality. His honesty became a byword in the city, and he was given the sobriquet *al amin* – worthy of trust. Though he remained unlettered, he was employed by tradesmen

and accompanied caravans to distant parts of the Arab world. His last employment was in the service of a rich widow, Khadija, who was 15 years older to him. At the age of 25, he married Khadija. It was a close and fulfilling relationship and he refused to take another wife till after she was dead. The Prophet had three sons, all of whom died in infancy, and four daughters. Fatima was his youngest and favourite child. It was during his marriage to Khadija that the Quran began to be revealed to him. Khadija was the first to believe that God had nominated her husband as his messenger.

Mohammed was given to retiring to a cave not far from Makka where he spent long hours meditating in solitude. His mind was disturbed by the people's lack of faith in the One God and their worshipping of goddesses alleged to be Allah's 'daughters', whose idols had been installed in the Kaaba (a cube-shaped structure in Makka). One night, during the latter part of the month of Ramazan of the year A.D. 610, he was shaken out of his reverie by a voice commanding him to recite. 'What shall I recite?' he asked. (In Arabic, the word Quran means recital.) The order to recite was repeated three times before the voice told him what to say:

> Recite in the name of your Lord who created man from clots of blood.
> Recite: Your Lord is the Most Bountiful one, who by pen taught man what he did not know.

The night when this happened is known as the

Leilat-ul Qadr or the night of glory. It is recorded in one of the *suras* as follows:

> We revealed the Quran on the night of Qadr. Would that you know what the night of Qadr is like. Better is the night of Qadr than a thousand months.

Revelations followed one after the other. Some at Makka were fairly lengthy; others after he fled the city in A.D. 622 – from which date begins the Muslim Hijri (from Hijrat: migration) calendar – were comparatively shorter. There are innumerable references in the Quran to the object of the revelations: 'This Quran will guide men to that which is most upright ... that which we have revealed in the Quran is a balm and a blessing ... we have revealed the Quran with the truth and with the truth it has come down.'

The Prophet did not claim originality for the revelations and asserted that he was only confirming revelations sent earlier by God to the Jews and the Christians. He was chosen to be its purveyor in the Arabic tongue so that: 'You may grasp its meaning. It is a transcript of our eternal book, sublime and full of wisdom ... free from all faults and easy to remember.'

There is a lot of repetition in the Quran of the stories from the Old Testament relating to Abraham and Isaac, Moses and the Pharaoh, David, Ezekiel, Jonah, Lot and Jesus. The purpose is to warn people who defy Allah and

his apostles of the consequences of doing so. Large portions of the Quran deal with crimes and their appropriate punishments, laws of marriage, divorce, inheritance and what may be lawfully consumed and what is forbidden (haram).

I was curious to find out whether or not the consumption of alcohol is haram, as orthodox Muslims of today maintain, or only disapproved of, as those who drink plead. I found as many as seven references to drink, all of which were somewhat ambiguous on the subject. The most quoted lines are from a chapter entitled 'The Bee', which run as follows:

> We give you the fruits of the palm and of the vine, from which you derive intoxicants and wholesome food.

Surely, in these lines, there is a sign for men of understanding. In a chapter entitled 'The Ranks', there is a description of paradise where the deserving will be:

> ... well provided for, feasting on fruit and honoured in the gardens of delight ... they shall be served with a goblet filled at a gushing fountain, white, and delicious to those who drink it. It will neither dull their senses nor befuddle them.

In a slightly different description in the chapter titled 'Mohammed', there is promise of: 'unpolluted water; and rivers of milk forever fresh; rivers of delectable wine and

rivers of clearest honey.' There are references to passing goblets from hand to hand, of ewers and cups of 'purest wine that will neither pain their heads nor take away their reason'; of 'pure wine securely sealed, whose very dregs are musk; a wine tempered with the waters of Tasnim' (the name of a paradisal stream). This reassures me that my daily sin remains unproven.

My chief purpose in writing this chapter is to inform readers of the literary excellence of the Quran. Before I do that I would like to introduce them to some verses that are most often recited by Muslims at prayer. I will use different translations so that you may make your own judgement of the quality of the translation. Much the most recited is Al Fatiha, the opening chapter usually described as Umm-ul Quran, the essence of the Quran, as well as Sabaan min al Mathani, seven of the often repeated, and al Hamd, the invocation:

> Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds,
> The Beneficent, the Merciful.
> Owner of the Day of Judgement,
> Thee (Alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help.
> Show us the straight path,
> The path of those whom Thou hast favoured;
> Not (the path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray.
>
> (Marmaduke Pickthall)

Most Muslim prayers end with the chanting of *durood* (verses in praise of the Prophet). Most often this is from Sura Ikhlas:

> Say: He is God,
> The One and Only.
> God, the Eternal, Absolute.
> He begetteth not,
> Not is He begotten;
> And there is none
> Like unto Him.

(Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

The Ayat-ul Qursi or, the 'throne verse', from the second sura 'The Cow (Al Baqareh)' has special significance for Muslims. It is perhaps the most commonly reproduced verse in Muslim mausoleums and worn in amulets and necklaces (I have a beautiful reproduction in silver on a bidri plate); cups with this *ayat* inscribed on them are often used to drink out of in the belief that they have healing properties. They are also recited to ward off fear of evil spirits:

> God: There is no God but He,
> The living, sustaining, ever self-subsisting.
> Neither does somnolence affect Him nor sleep.
> To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and
> the earth, and who can intercede with Him
> except by His leave?

Known to Him is all that is present before men
and what is hidden in time past and time
future, and not even a little of His knowledge
can they grasp except what He will.
His seat extends over heavens and the earth,
And He tires not protecting them
He alone is all high and supreme.

(Ahmad Ali)

The next verse is often quoted to prove Islam's tolerance of other faiths:

There is no compulsion in the matter of faith.
Distinct is the way of guidance now from error.
He who turns away from the forces of evil
And believes in God, will surely hold fast
To a handle that is strong and unbreakable.

(Ahmad Ali)

For some reason not clear to me, Sura Yaseen is described as 'the heart of the Quran'. It reassures people of the continuity of life:

It is We who will bring back the dead to life; We record the deeds of men and the marks they leave behind ... they laugh to scorn every apostle that comes to them. Let the once dead earth be a sign

to them. We gave it up and from it produced grain for their sustenance. We planted it with the palm and the vine and watered it with gushing springs, so that men might feed on its fruit.

The entrance gate of the Taj Mahal in Agra is festooned with lines from this *sura.*

A great favourite with Muslims and lovers of literature is the Sura Rehman (The Merciful), with the line 'which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?' repeated after every assertion:

It is the Merciful who has taught the Koran.
He created man and taught him articulate speech.
The sun and the moon pursue their ordered course.
The plants and the trees bow down in adoration.
He raised the heaven on high and set the balance of all things, that you might not transgress it.
Give just weight and full measure.
He laid the earth for His creatures, with all its fruits and blossom-bearing palm,
Chaff-covered grain and scented herbs.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

He Created man from potter's clay and the Jinn from smokeless fire.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

The Lord of the two easts is He, and the Lord of
the two wests.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

He has let loose the two oceans: They meet one
another.
Yet between them stands a barrier which they
cannot overrun.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Pearls and corals come from both.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

His are the ships that sail like banners upon the
ocean.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

All who live on earth are doomed to die.
But the face of your Lord will abide for ever,
In all its majesty and glory.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

All who dwell in heaven and earth beseech Him.
Each day some new task employs Him.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Mankind and Jinn,
We shall surely find the time to judge you.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Mankind and Jinn,
If you have power to penetrate the confines of
heaven and earth, then penetrate them!
But this you shall not do except with Our own
authority.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Flames of fire shall be lashed at you, and molten
brass.
There shall be none to help you.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

When the sky splits asunder and reddens like a
rose or stained leather
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

On that day neither man nor jinnee shall be
asked about his sins.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

The wrongdoers shall be known by their looks.
They shall be seized by their forelocks and their
feet.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

That is the Hell which the sinners deny.
They shall wander between fire and water fiercely
seething.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

But for those that fear the majesty of their Lord,
there are two gardens planted with shady trees.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Each is watered by a flowing spring.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Each bears every kind of fruit in pairs.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

They shall recline on couches lined with thick brocade,
And within their reach will hang the fruits of both gardens.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

They shall dwell with bashful virgins whom neither man nor jinnee will have touched before.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Virgins as fair as corals and rubies.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Shall the reward of goodness be anything but good?
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

And besides these there shall be two other
gardens
(Which of your Lord's blessing would you deny?)
of darkest green.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

A gushing fountain shall flow in each.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Each planted with fruit-trees, the palm and the
pomegranate.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

In each there shall be virgins chaste and fair.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

Dark-eyed virgins sheltered in their tents
(Which of your Lord's blessings would you
deny?)
whom neither man nor jinnee will have touched
before.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?

They shall recline on green cushions and rich
carpets.
Which of your Lord's blessings would you deny?
Blessed by the name of your Lord, the Lord of
majesty and glory!

(N. J. Dawood)

Another favourite is Sura Nissa (The Heights) with the admonition:

> Do not corrupt the earth after it has been purged of evil .... He sends forth the winds as harbingers of His mercy, and when they have gathered up a heavy cloud, He drives it on to some dead land and lets the water fall upon it, bringing forth all manner of fruit.

Truth, assures the Quran, will always triumph over falsehood: God is the truthful one. 'We will hurl the truth at falsehood and it shall smite it; and lo it will vanish.' The retribution for falsehood and evil need not be sudden because people are given time for repentance. 'I am with those who wait', says the Quran. The time for repentance should not be frittered away. Repentance releases forces of mercy; every tear drop shed in contrition washes away the stains of sin. The Prophet himself gave the assurance that 'one who repents sincerely is like one who never committed sin'.

It should be noted that unlike Christianity, Islam does not ask people to love their enemies (which is contrary to nature) but only forgive them. Hate the sin but not the sinner. It also justifies retaliation but limits it to the damage suffered. Contrary to popular notion, the Quran does not exhort Muslims to wage instant war against unbelievers (kafirs). It is only against those who persecute believers or revile the Quran and the Prophet that violence

is sanctioned. Otherwise every person is free to believe in what he or she thinks best. 'To you, your way, and to me mine', declare the revelations and give the assurance: 'There is no compulsion in religion.'

In Sura Maida (The Tablet Spread), Allah assured His Prophet that 'this day have I perfected your religion for you.' In this *sura* is a memorable verse illustrating the tolerance preached by Islam:

> ... that who ever killed a human being, except as a punishment for murder or other wicked crimes, should be looked upon as though he had killed all mankind; and that whoever saved a human life should be regarded as though he had saved all mankind.
>
> (N. J. Dawood)

There is lot more in the Quran than I can put in these pages. Numerous passages can be read for their moral messages or their literary excellence. Several of the shorter *suras* have powerful poetic imagery. To wit: 'By the snorting war steeds, which strike fire with their hoofs as they gallop to the red at dawn and with a trail of dust split the foe in two; man is ungrateful to his Lord. To this he himself shall bear witness.' And again: 'I swear by the glory of sunset, by the night, and all that it brings

together, by the moon, in her full perfection that you shall march onwards from state to state.'

The Sura Al Dhariayat (The Winds) opens with the memorable lines:

> By the dust-scattering winds and the heavily-laden clouds, by the swiftly-gliding ships, and by the angels who deal out blessings to all men that with which you are threatened shall be fulfilled and the Last Judgement shall surely come to pass.

A verse in Sura Luqman asserts:

> If all the trees in the earth were pens, and the sea, with seven more seas to replenish it, were ink, the writing of Allah's words could never be finished.

The message may be summed up in two lines from *The Prophet*: 'We will hurl Truth at Falsehood, until Truth shall triumph and Falsehood be no more.'

In all, Mohammed had 22 years to reveal the Quran till he died in Madina in A.D. 632 at the age of 62. To this day, the Quran continues to fire the imagination of Muslims the world over. You owe it to yourself to find out the reason why.

In the wake of partition in August 1947, when millions of Muslims were compelled to leave their homes and properties in India to migrate to Pakistan, thousands had been butchered in the Hindu-Sikh versus Muslim riots, and many more forced to seek shelter in refugee camps, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad who had foreseen the consequences of dividing India on religious lines addressed a vast throng of disillusioned Muslims of Delhi from the steps of the Jama Masjid. He admonished them for not heeding the words of warning he had been speaking and writing his entire life. He said: 'You may not remember that I told you about all this to come but you sliced away my tongue; when I picked up my pen you cut off my hands; when I tried to lead you along the right path, you broke my legs; when I tried to turn, you broke my back.'

From the time Azad started his journalistic and political career in Calcutta in 1912, his message to his fellow-Muslims was consistently the same. He chided them for keeping away from the freedom movement and letting non-Muslims be in the forefront. Mohammad Ali Jinnah dubbed Azad as 'the show-boy of the Congress' and though the vast majority of Indian Muslims supported the Muslim League's demand for a separate Muslim state, the Maulana remained a stolid supporter of the Indian National Congress. When Mahatma Gandhi (reluctantly), Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel acquiesced to the partition of the country, Azad stood alone among the leaders in opposing

it. Where did he derive this strength to tread the lonely path and the courage to maintain that he was right? The inspiration came from only one source – the Quran.

Azad was born in Makka (on 11 November 1888) of an Indian father and an Arab mother. His first language was the language of the Quran: Arabic. His father came from a line of Islamic theologians and he was expected to continue in the profession. The family migrated back to Calcutta where Azad picked up Urdu and Persian. He went through a short phase of agnosticism, rejecting all faith, and apparently indulged himself in pleasures of the flesh. Then he went back to Islam and from the very start of his career was convinced that it was the duty of the Indian Muslims to join Hindus in the struggle against colonialism. While still in his early twenties, he started to publish an Urdu weekly, *Al Hilal*. It rapidly picked up circulation, touching 29,000 (no mean figure for a journal in those days). Although he wrote mostly on religious topics, his nationalist views displeased the government and the paper was banned. Azad launched another one, *Al Balagha*. It was in an issue of *Al Balagha* in early 1916 that he announced that he had embarked on an Urdu translation of the Quran and had already rendered the first three chapters up to 'Sura Al Imran', and hoped to finish the entire book by the end of the year.

That was not to be. On 3 March 1916, an order under the Defence of India Act compelled him to quit Calcutta. Most provincial governments refused him entry; his only choices were the Bombay Presidency or Bihar. He chose

Bihar because it was nearer Calcutta and took up residence at Ranchi. He completed the translation of another chapter Sura al Nisa, when an order of internment was passed against him and all the papers were seized. He appealed to the governor, Lord S. P. Sinha. After a fortnight his papers were returned to him. This roused the ire of Sir Charles Cleveland, head of the CID, who travelled all the way from Delhi to Ranchi and reseized the papers to have them scrutinized lest they contain inflammatory material. Hoping to have the papers returned to him, Azad went ahead with his translation and commentaries and completed the work in 1918. On his relase he asked for his papers to be returned to him. After a long time they were, but before he could put them together he was rearrested in November 1921 when the Indian National Congress was declared unlawful. For the third time, his papers were seized and stuffed in gunny bags to be taken away. He was released after 15 months in jail. The papers returned to him were jumbled up, torn and many pages destroyed. The Maulana lost heart and gave up the project as being ill-starred.

In 1927, he began all over again. He finished the translation and commentaries on 20 July 1930 while in detention in Meerut Jail (now in Uttar Pradesh). The genesis of three volumes of the *Tarjuman-ul Quran* (translation of the Quran) shows the mettle of Maulana Azad.

One may well ask: Why this passion to translate a book that had been translated several times into Urdu,

English and most world languages? Azad was convinced that existing translations had missed the message of the Quran by introducing esoteric meanings to words that were simple and clear, so that even illiterate Arab tribesmen could understand them. This happened after the Prophet's generation had died out and Islam had spread to non-Arab people. Greek, Iranian and Buddhist concepts found their way into interpretations of the revelations. Personal views of commentators (*tafsir birrai*) distorted meanings of simple Arabic words. Then there were the Sufis who looked for 'hidden meanings' when there was nothing hidden in the Quran. Azad's motive was to 'explain the Quran in the manner of the Quran' – Fadhakkir bil Quran. He rarely goes beyond explaining the etymology of the words used and was very sparing in quoting traditions ascribed to the Prophet (Hadith) to shore up his arguments.

Although young in years and with scanty knowledge of European languages, Azad read extensively on whatever he could find on religion or philosophy that was available to him. Inevitably, the influence of Muslim theologians weighed heavily on him. Foremost was Imam Mohammad Ghazali (twelfth century), who, like him, had passed through a period of disbelief before returning to religion. Ghazali turned to mysticism; Azad who had a Sufi background rejected mysticism. Nevertheless, he admired some Sufis, like the dervish Sarmad, who was condemned as a heretic by the Ulema and beheaded under orders of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1659.

Sarmad's green tomb is on the eastern end of the steps of Delhi's Jama Masjid, close to where Maulana Azad is buried. Of Sarmad, Azad said: 'He stood on the minaret of love from which the walls of the Kaaba and the temple appeared of equal height.'

For inexplicable reasons, Azad was much impressed by Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan, the founder of the Aligarh Muslim University and the earliest propagator of Muslim separatism and aloofness from the freedom movement. More influential were Jamaluddin Afghani and Mohammed Abdul Shah Waliullah of Delhi, who stood for a Pan-Islamic union of Muslim communities. As early as 1912 Azad wrote: 'The preoccupation with majority and minority has become the root of the problem .... Now the brotherhood of 80 million believers [meaning Muslims] in the unity of God are afraid of 220 million idol worshippers of India.' Azad was a firm believer in 'confident partnership' with Hindu India.

It is interesting to note that Azad's contemporary, the poet Allama Iqbal, who was as deeply concerned with the future of his community and like Azad drew his inspiration from Islamic sources, took a completely different path. Between 1905 and 1910 both travelled abroad. Iqbal went to Europe and was deeply impressed with the vitality of Western civilization and became more conscious of the decadence that had overtaken the Islamic world. He gave expression of it in his famous poem *Shikwa* – complaint. Although addressed to Allah, he wrote of the glorious past of the idol-breaking conquerors,

fired with Islamic zeal. Azad travelled to Muslim countries struggling for freedom from European colonial powers and felt that the only hope was to revive Islam by firing Muslims with the spirit that Allah had bequeathed to the Prophet through his revelations: the Quran. Iqbal was inspired by Islamic history; Azad by the Quran and the life of the Prophet. Iqbal came to the conclusion that Muslims were a people apart from the Hindus and their salvation lay in a state of their own. Azad totally rejected the two-nation theory and the concept of a separate Muslim state as against the teaching of the Quran.

Of the three-volume translation of the Quran by Azad, the first, which deals with the opening (Sura-ul Fatiha), is the most significant. It consists of a bare seven lines of a few words each:

In the name of Allah, the compassionate, the
merciful
Praise is for Allah only, the Lord of all being
The Benevolent, the Merciful
Master of the Day of Recompense
Thee only do we serve and
Thee alone do we ask for help,
Direct us to the straight path
The path of those to whom
Thou hast been gracious
Not of those who have incurred
Thy displeasure,
Nor of those who have gone astray.

This chapter has been described as the core or essence of the Quran (Umm-ul Quran), the sufficient (Al Kafia), and the treasure house (Al Kanz). Since it is much the most repeated part of the Quran, one of the revelations confirms: 'O Prophet! It is fact that we have given these seven oft repated verses and the great Quran.'

The Prophet never laid claims to propounding a new religion, but only to bringing back a people who had strayed from the straight path of worshipping the one God into animism, ancestor worship, totemism and idolatry. The two most commonly used names of God, Allah and Rabb, were both pre-Islamic. Allah is really an exclamation of wonder at the universe and its creator: hail God! The Sikhs' Waheguru is exactly the same. Rabb is a portmanteau word meaning the provider (Al Razzaq) as well as teacher, master and Lord. The Quran begins with *hamd* (praise) to Allah (Bismillah) and His two great qualities, benevolence (Al Rahman) and mercy (Al Raheem). Thereafter it emphasizes His qualities as the provider-sustainer of the universe (Rabb-ul Alameen).

Maulana Azad points out that the things most needed in life – air, water and earth (to provide food) – are free gifts of God given in abundance. The Quran emphasizes this fact: 'And we send down water from the heavens in its due degree, and cause it to settle in the earth, and we have power for its withdrawal too. And by it, we cause gardens of palm trees and vineyards to spring forth for you, in which ye have plenteous fruits

and whereof you eat.' And again: 'And no one thing is there, but … its store houses, and we send it not but in settled measure.' God gives and God takes away: birth, growth, decay and death are ordained by Him. Says the Quran: 'It is God who hath created you in weakness and given you strength. Then after strength, weakness and grey hair.'

Azad points out the difference between Hindu and Islamic views on the purpose of creation. Hindus believe that the universe is God's *leela* (sport) and unreal. Islam attributes deliberate purpose to creation. Says the Quran: 'We have not created them but for a serious end.' Azad produces a telling argument for the existence of God: 'The nature of Man can hardly agree to believe that there can be an action without an actor, orderlineness without a director, a plan without a planner, a building without a builder, a design without a designer.'

Proofs of God's existence, says Azad, are there for everyone who cares to see them and quotes the Quran: 'Let man look at his food; it was He who first rained down copious rains, then cleft the earth with clefts, and caused the upgrowth of the grain, and grapes and healing herbs, and fruits and herbage, for the service of yourselves and your cattle.'

Why did God give us birth and sustenance? Azad answers this question with a query: 'Shall the object in shaping of which nature has had to make such prolonged, careful arrangement be meant just to eat and drink for a little moment on earth and get extinguished forever?'

An important attribute of God is *adalat*: justice. Maulana Azad emphasizes that divine justice is not dependent on the whim of God, but entirely based on the law of causation – what you sow, you reap. 'He who doeth right – it is for himself, and he who doeth evil – it is for himself; and the Lord will not deal unfairly with his servants', assures the Quran.

Azad differs from other theologians in holding that the concept of one, almighty God is not an evolutionary process but the revival of one with which the world started: 'Men were first of one religion only; then they fell to variance', says the Quran. Azad also believes that the Islamic concept of God is more advanced than the Jewish and the Christian because the Jews regarded Him as a tribal God of a 'chosen people' while the Christians humanized him inasmuch as they regarded Jesus as the Son of God. The Quran was close to the Upanishads in refusing to define God (*neti, neti* – not this, not this) but took a more positive attitude by making Him a repository of attributes – creativity, providence, justice, mercy and so on. The Prophet did his utmost to avoid his being treated as an incarnation or avataar of Allah. When he died, his father-in law, the first caliph, spoke to the gathering: 'He who worshipped Mohammed is dead, and he who worshipped God, let him know that God ever lives. He has no death.' In emphasizing God as the sole object of worship, the Quran specifically forbade ascribing partners to share his singular sovereignty.

It is to this one rule of the universe that we (all mankind) must turn for guidance (*hidayat*) to lead us along the straight path, the one trodden by the righteous, not by evil doers.

It was his firm conviction in the unity of God and the brotherhood of mankind revealed in the Quran that made Maulana Azad turn his face against the concept of separate states based on religious differences. 'Whatever your so-called race, your homeland, your nationality, and whatever your circumstances in life or sphere of activity, if only you all resolve to serve but one God, all these will lose their sting. Your hearts will be united. You will begin to feel that the entire globe is your home and all mankind is but one people, and that you all form a single family – Ayaal Allah – the family of God.'

Chapter Four

Anti-Muslim Prejudices

Islam is more precise with its dos and don'ts than other religions. This gives the impression of uncompromising rigidity, which is not the same thing as fanaticism. For that matter, Sikhs are no less fanatic than Muslims.

Prejudice has no factual or logical justification and is therefore very difficult to overcome. The most widespread are religious and ethnic prejudices; they are the basis of our communal problems. You have to first make the people admit what they are and then give rational answers to them in the hope that their prejudices will then disappear. I for one turned my back on religion after having studied most of them. I came to the conclusion that religious prejudices have done more harm than good to humanity. I accept ahimsa (non-violence) as *paromo* dharma (primary duty). One does not have to belong to any religion to believe that one must not hurt anyone; the rest is of marginal or no importance.

Years ago, an experiment was tried out by a lady teaching in a college in South India. She sensed that many of her Hindu students harboured undefined prejudices against Muslims. She asked them to spell them out in writing so that they could discuss them openly in the class. After she had received their views, she put them in serial form and opened the debate. My answers to the questions are as follows.

First prejudice: Muslims can marry many wives and consequently have large families. If they continue to indulge in polygamy and breed at the rate they are doing,

they will soon outnumber the Hindus and make India a Muslim state.

Answer: Muslim men are indeed entitled to marry up to four wives but rarely do they exercise the right unless their wives are barren or physically or mentally impaired. On the other hand, Hindu males, though not legally allowed to have more than one wife, are also known to indulge in polygamy. Muslims do not have larger families than Hindus, Christians or Sikhs. This has been repeatedly brought out by market surveys, which show that, if anything, the Christian and Sikh birth rate is higher than that of the Muslims. Some years ago I had published names of members of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha giving the sizes of their families. There was no difference in fecundity on communal lines. When talking of large families, I remember that the former president of India, V. V. Giri, had eleven children and former railway minister who was earlier chief minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav, has nine. The list could carry on endlessly.

Second prejudice: Muslims are fanatics who try to impose their religions on other people.

Answer: Islam is more precise with its dos and don'ts than other religions. This gives the impression of uncompromising rigidity, which is not the same thing as fanaticism. For that matter, Sikhs are no less fanatic than Muslims. If bigoted Muslims in Kashmir try to impose purdah on their women, Sikh hotheads too try to impose dress code on Sikh and Hindu women in Punjab. There

is nothing to choose between their respective forms of narrowmindedness. No community can impose its religion on others; whatever conversions take place these days are those of deprived people promised a better deal. That explains conversion to Islam or Christianity amongst Scheduled Castes and tribals.

Third prejudice: Muslims do not respect other religious places of worship. They desecrate Hindu and Sikh temples.

Answer: There is historical evidence of desecration of Hindu and Sikh temples by Muslim conquerors. However, Hindus and Sikhs, when they had the upper hand, did not lag behind in desecrating mosques. This contest in desecration almost came to an end with Independence. Since then hardly any places of worship have been tampered with on either side. It is a section of the Hindus that has been talking of demolishing mosques in Varanasi and Vrindavan (both in Uttar Pradesh) to settle centuries-old scores. And who can pardon the demolishing of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya (also in Uttar Pradesh) by Hindu fanatics on 6 December 1992?

Also, let us not forget that all religious systems everywhere in the world have engendered cults committed to violence and martyrdom. I recall years back one David Koresh, the leader of the Davidian Branch of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, defied the police for several days before he allegedly set fire to his headquarters killing many men, women and children.

I can't give the exact numbers today, but at one stage, according to some estimates, there were over 2500 religious cults in America, of which over 900 believed in Armageddon or the Day of Judgement. The largest following was of a religious organization known as Church Universal and Triumphant, run by a woman, Elizabeth Clare Prophet. She and her husband and the vice-president of the group were estimated to have 5000 members who had been stockpiling arms for almost 20 years. In one police raid on the group's headquarters, seven automatic rifles and 120,000 rounds of ammunition were seized.

More bizarre than Koresh's was the case of Jim Jones of Guyana. In November 1978 he forced 900 of his followers including women and children to commit suicide.

True, Islam has generated more cults than Christianity. Many of them like the Muslim Brotherhood are committed to violence. They do not hesitate to defile holy precincts of mosques by shedding blood. In 1979 over 200 pilgrims were slain in the Kaaba. In November of the same year Shia followers of Mohammad Ali Qureshi seized the grand mosque of Mecca and proclaimed their leader as the Mahdi. It took the Saudi army equipped with tanks five days to evict the squatters after killing some of them. Some years ago a young Shia woman in Pakistan decided to take her followers over the waters on a pilgrimage to Karbala in Iraq. Over 40 of them were drowned in the sea off Karachi. Salman

Rusdie fictionalized the tragic episode in his *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

We in India have similar groups of fanatics committed to violence. It is not a mere coincidence that leaders of these cults are men or women with diseased minds but mesmeric powers of speech. In the early 1980s, in Punjab, we had Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale who ordered cold-blooded executions of his detractors. He and his militant followers were holed up in the Golden Temple at Amritsar. In early June 1984, the Indian Army entered this temple to evict the militants, and in the ensuing battle, brought about the destruction of the sacred Akal Takht. (See also Chapter 1.) Bhindranwale himself was killed. In the 1980s, thousands of lives were lost in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi.

Religious zealotry has also reared its ugly head among Hindus usually regarded as a peace-loving and tolerant people. A part of that myth was exploded at Ayodhya in December 1992 and also during the 2002 Gujarat riots, when Muslims were targeted by Hindu mobs. What remains of that myth will be demolished as soon as right-wing fanatics take over leadership of the community. Hence, beware of religion!

Fourth prejudice: Muslims are not loyal to India as they harbour pro-Pakistani feelings.
Answer: A large number of Muslims migrated from India to Pakistan in 1947-48 – some willingly, others forced to leave because of widespread anti-Muslim violence.

Many families were divided. The desire to visit their relations across the border should not be construed as disloyalty to India; nor childish display of adulation of Pakistani cricketers in matches against India. There is no evidence whatsoever of Muslims' disloyalty to India in times of Indo–Pak wars. The fact is that many Muslims laid down their lives fighting for India against Pakistan.

Chapter Five

The Significance of the Ramzaan Fast

Of the three Eids (days of rejoicing), the 'Eid-uz-Zuha' or 'Bakri-Id' (Eid of sacrifice), 'Eid-e-Milad-un-Nabi' (the Prophet's birthday), the one following the end of Ramadan on the first day of the next month Shawwal is the most auspicious and is known as 'Eid-ul-Fitr'.

I had very vague notions of why Muslims fast during Ramzaan. So I asked my Muslim friends why they did so and read up all matter that I could find in my library on this topic. I am writing this chapter for the benefit of my non-Muslim readers in the conviction that knowledge of the belief of our fellow citizens creates better understanding.

Of all the months of the Muslim calendar, Ramzaan or Ramadan is the only one designated as felicitous – *shareef* in India, *mubarak* in Arabic. The observance of fast during this month is next to namaaz (prayer) the secondmost important pillar of Islam – the other two being zakat (charity) and haj (pilgrimage). The month is divided into three ten-day periods (*ashra*). The first is devoted to *rehmat* (kindness), the second to *mafrat* (forgiveness) and the third to insurgence against being consigned to hell.

The most important night, known as Leilat-ul Qadr or the night of glory, falls in the last ten days of the lunar month and is usually observed on the 27th day. According to a Hadith, while the reward for other good works is given by angels, the reward for fasting is given by Allah Himself. Apart from the good that occasional fasting does to the body, the real purpose of the Ramadan fast is to give people personal experience of what hunger and thirst

are like so that they can better appreciate the pangs the poor suffer from due to deprivation. The fast also cleanses the body of accumulated toxins and cleanses the soul of unconcern for the suffering of the underprivileged.

Contrary to popular belief, the fast does not began with sunrise but well before that, when the eastern horizons begins to turn grey. A strict watch is kept on the time as eating or drinking even a minute after the prescribed time can invalidate the fast. It ends with the setting of the sun, when it is broken with *iftari* – a light repast of dates or fruit. Of late, throwing large *iftar* receptions by various politicians to gain political leverage is the exploitation of a solemn religious rite.

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The tradition of fasting is pre-Muslim practised both by the Jews and the Pagans. In Arabia it was known as 'Tahannuth', the month of asceticism. People observed this month by fasting from sunrise to sunset, abstaining from other worldly pleasures and meditating on their doings. The Prophet himself spent this month in a cave in Mount Hera, a short distance from Mecca taking his wife Khadija and servants with him. It was during this month that one night known as Leilat-ul Qadr or the night of glory he heard the voice of God commanding him to read, which is known as 'Iqraa'. The Prophet

being illiterate was unable to do so. The order was repeated three times before the Prophet recited the very revelation, which, in the course of years, became the Quran:

Proclaim
In the name of thy lord and cherisher who
Created man out a mere clot of congealed blood.
Proclaim.
And thy lord is most bountiful
He who taught the use of the pen
Taught man that which he knew not
And so on.

There is another reference in the Quran to the night of glory:

We have indeed revealed this message
In the night of power
And what will explain
To thee what night of power is
The night of power
Is better than a thousand months
Therein came down
The angels and the sprit
By God's permission
On every errand
Peace
This until the rise of morn.

It is believed that, it was after this revelation, the Prophet asked his followers to face Mecca instead of Jerusalem when they prayed and fixed Friday as the day for special congregational prayers. It was also in the month of Ramadan many years later that the Prophet returned from Medina to Mecca as its liberator. He was questioned by two followers on the merits of abstention. 'It is not "riza" or self-torture', he replied, 'it fortifies the body and the soul till they become a shield. It will protect you from evil till holes are made in it.'

'And what makes these holes?' asked his companions.

'Falsehood and calumny,' replied the Prophet.

For the Shias, Ramadan has added significance as it was during this month that Hazrat Ali (the son-in-law of the Prophet) received an injury to which he succumbed three days later. They spend three days in mourning.

After Eid prayers, a collection (*fitra*) is made to be disbursed amongst the poor and the needy. I exhort all my non-Muslim friends to always wish our Muslim brethren 'Eid mubarak'.

Chapter Six

The Sikh Religion and the Beauty of the Adi Granth

... the Granth Sahib is a unique historical document. It is perhaps the only kind of writing of a scriptural nature that has preserved without embellishment or misconstruction the original writings of the religious leaders. It has saved the literary works of other poets of the time from the vagaries of human memory.

In the life of every nation there comes a time when accepted values begin to be questioned. This is usually occasioned by a challenge from another set of values at variance with those formerly accepted. The conflict may result in compromise and the emergence of a new code of living incorporating principles common to both systems. Sometimes, the new code finds adherents who break away from their original loyalties to form a new community bound by allegiance to a new way of life. The Sikhs are an example of the emergence of a community with a communal consciousness fashioned out of new social norms.

For several centuries Indians accepted Hinduism as something ordained and immutable. From A.D. 780 began Muslim invasions from the north. The invaders' religion and way of life were the antithesis of whatever Hinduism stood for. Their religion was a simple set of dos and don'ts, most of them with direct bearing on matters of everyday life. A large part of the Quran consisted of rules on what a man may or may not eat and drink, how many wives he may marry, how to treat them and divorce them. The faith itself was brief and simple: that there was one God and Mohammed was his Prophet. The Quran was the word of God and what it said was law unto mankind. The Quran insisted on the

unity of God in opposition to Hindu pantheism; it deified the iconoclast in a country of idol worshippers; it stood for the equality of men in a country ridden with caste distinctions; and it sanctioned pleasures of the flesh and palate in a country that preached the ascetic ideal.

For seven centuries Islam and Hinduism battled for supremacy. There were periods when Islam, with characteristic impatience, argued sword in hand. Hinduism with characteristic resilience withstood persecution and took the edge off the Islamic sword. By the fifteenth century, India had many million Muslims, but by then Muslims were observing caste distinctions, visiting Hindu temples, and generally accepting Hindu customs and conventions. Above all, they accepted the principles of religious tolerance. On the other side, the Hindus themselves recognized the superiority of the concept of the indivisibility of the Godhead, of the evils of caste and other unwholesome social customs. The stage was set for the emergence of a school of thought propagating a fusion of faiths based on principles common to Islam and Hinduism. This was the school of Bhakti philosophy.

Like the religious reformation in Europe, the Bhakti movement in India was basically a protest against religious dogma, ritual and intolerance. The propounders of Bhakti philosophy – Ramananda, Gorakhnath, Chaitanya, Kabir, Tulsidas, Vallabh and Namdev – taught that the form and place of worship were of little consequence and that basically Hinduism and Islam had

the same values; only the nomenclature was different. They evolved a form of religious poetry with a vocabulary that borrowed liberally from the sacred texts of both Hindus and Muslims. It had a spontaneity that appealed to the masses. All that the movement lacked was personal leadership and guidance. This was provided by Guru Nanak (1469–1539), the founder of the Sikh faith.

Guru Nanak, like the other Bhakti philosophers, was more concerned with spreading religious tolerance than with founding a new community. His teachings, however, fired the imagination of the Punjab peasantry and even during his lifetime a large number of followers gathered around him.

At first, they were merely known as his disciples (in Sanskrit: *shishya*). Some time later, these disciples became a homogeneous group whose faith was exclusively the teachings of Nanak. The *shishya* became the 'Sikh' (corruption of the Sanskrit word).

Guru Nanak was content to be a teacher. He laid no claims to divinity or to kinship with God. He neither invested his writings with the garb of prophecy nor his words with the sanctity of a 'message'. His teaching was a crusade against cant and humbug in religion and his life was patterned by what he said. What he said was eminently well said, as his hymns are the finest in the Punjabi language. What he did was eminently well done, because his life was an example of his faith.

He ignored religious and caste distinctions and took as his associates a Muslim musician and a low-caste

Hindu. He ridiculed such Hindu religious practices as giving importance to bathing in 'sacred' rivers, wearing 'sacred' threads and making offerings to dead ancestors. He personally went to the places of pilgrimage and demonstrated to worshippers their utter absurdity. Likewise, he went on pilgrimages to Muslim shrines and reprimanded priests who had made a trade of religion and transgressed the injunctions of the Quran. His success in efforts to bring Hindus and Muslims together was a personal one. He was acclaimed by both communities, and on his death they clamoured for his body – the Muslims wanted to bury him, the Hindus wanted to cremate him. Even today he is regarded in the Punjab as a symbol of harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims. A popular couplet describes him:

> Guru Nanak the King of Fakeers,
> To the Hindu a Guru, to the Muslims a Peer.

In fifty years of travel and teaching, Guru Nanak had attracted a following that could at best be described as a group dissenting from both Hinduism and Islam. (See also Chapter 8.) It was left to his successors to mould this group into a community with its own language and literature, religious beliefs and institutions, traditions and conventions.

Guru Nanak was followed by nine other Gurus. Succession was determined on the basis of finding a teacher most fitted to safeguard and develop the spiritual legacy left behind by Nanak. Hence, for two centuries, there was remarkable continuity in the functions of leadership. These years saw the consummation of the religious aspect of Sikhism. They also saw nascent Hindu nationalism grow to political power and pave the way to the setting up of a Sikh state. Of the ten Gurus, the second, Guru Angad, the fourth, Guru Ramdas, the sixth, Guru Hargobind, and the tenth, Guru Gobind Singh, were chiefly responsible for measures that fostered communal consciousness and welded the Sikhs into an independent community.

On the Hindu New Year's Day (13 or 14 April, depending on the leap year) in 1699, Guru Gobind Singh assembled his followers and initiated five, known as the Punj Piyaras (five beloved ones), into a new fraternity, which he named the Khalsa or 'the pure'. Of these five, one was a Brahmin, one a Kshatriya and three belonged to the lower castes. They were made to drink out of the same bowl and given new names with the suffix 'Singh' (lion) attached to them. They swore to observe the 'Five Ks': to wear their hair and beard unshorn (*kesh*); to carry a comb in the hair (*kungha*); to wear a pair of shorts (*kuchha*); to wear a steel bangle on the wrist (*kara*); and to carry a sword (*kirpan*). The Khalsa were also enjoined to observe four rules of conduct (*rahat*): not to cut the hair; abstain from smoking tobacco and consuming

alcoholic drinks; not to eat kosher meat; and refrain from carnal intercourse with Muslims. Ever since that day every Sikh youth when he comes of age is initiated into the Khalsa by the baptism (*pahul*) of the sword and the suffix 'Singh' is attached to his name. Thereafter he has no caste save one, the fraternity of the Khalsa.

The reason that prompted Guru Gobind Singh to introduce these forms and symbols has never been adequately explained. Neither he nor any of his contemporaries refer to the subject in their writings. Some of them are, however, intelligible in their historical background.

Guru Gobind Singh completed the religious facet of Sikhism. He turned an innocuous band of pacifists into armed crusaders. (See also Chapter 8.) Those who did not accept his innovations of forms and symbols remained just Sikhs, usually described as Sahaj Dharis or 'the easy-going'; those who did became the Khalsa. Guru Gobind Singh lost all his four sons in the struggle against the Muslim rulers and declared the succession of Gurus at an end. The Sikhs were to look to the Adi Granth for spiritual guidance, which was henceforth to be the symbolic representation of the ten Gurus. Ceremonies and customs distinct from those of the Hindus were made current. Thus the Sikhs became a new community with an independent entity.

The Sikh Religion

By legislative enactment a Sikh has been defined as 'one who believes in the ten Gurus and the Granth Sahib'.

This definition is not exhaustive. There are people who call themselves Sikhs and yet do not believe in all the ten Gurus. There are others who believe that the line of Gurus continued after the tenth and follow the precepts of a living Guru.

Similarly, some Sikhs challenge the authenticity of certain passages of the Granth Sahlib, while others insist on including extraneous writing in it. Besides these Sikhs, there are numerous subsects distinguished by allegiance to one or other Guru or claiming that the real Guru had been overlooked in deciding the succession. Despite these discrepant factors, it can be safely asserted that the belief in the ten Gurus and the authorized version of the Granth Sahlib are the common basic factors of the Sikh faith, and they cover the vast majority of Sikhs. The only practical sectional division of the Sikh community is into the orthodox Khalsa and the clean-shaven Sahaj Dhari.

The Concept of God

The Sikh religion, as enunciated in the scriptures, is a wholesome mixture of Islamic Sufi doctrines and Hindu mystic philosophy. It inculcates belief in the unity of God and equates God with truth. The preamble to the morning prayer Japji, which is recited as an introduction to all religious ceremonies and is known as the *mool* mantra, the basic belief, states:

There is One God
His Name is Truth.
He is the Creator,
He is without fear and without hate.
He is beyond time Immortal,
His Spirit pervades the universe.
He is not born,
Nor does He die to be born again,
He is self-existent.
By the guru's grace shalt thou worship Him.

Before Time itself
There was truth.
When Time began to run its course
He was the truth.
Even now, He is the truth.
Evermore shall truth persist.

(Nanak)

The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, ventured farther into philosophic speculation in describing God as *akalpurukh* (timeless):

Time is the only God,
The primal and the final
The creator and the destroyer.
How can words describe him?

God has no form or substance.
He is *nirankar* (formless).
Although He is beyond human comprehension,
By righteous living one can invoke His grace.

In the first verse of the morning prayer, Japji, Guru Nanak said:

Not by thought alone
Can he be known,
Tho' one think a hundred thousand times
Not in solemn silence,
Nor in deep meditation.
Though fasting yields an abundance of virtue,
No! By none of these
Nor by a hundred thousand other devices
Can God be reached.
How then shall truth be known?
How the veil of false illusion torn?
O Nanak, thus runneth the writ divine.
The righteous path let it be thine.

The Sikh religion expressly forbids the worship of idols and emblems as Gods in no uncertain terms:

They that worship strange Gods
Cursed shall be their lives, cursed their
habitations,
Poison shall be their food – each morsel.

Poisoned too shall be their garments.
In life for them is misery,
In life hereafter, hell.

(the third Guru, Amar Das)

Some worship stones and on their heads they
bear them,
Some the phallus – strung in necklaces wear its
emblem.
Some behold their God in the South,
Some to the West bow their head,
Some worship images, others [are] busy praying
to the dead.
The world is thus bound in false ritual
And God's secret is still unread.

(the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh)

Guru Nanak, while attending the evening service at a Hindu temple where a salver full of small oil lamps and incense was being waved in front of the idol before it was laid to rest for the night, composed this verse:

The firmament is thy salver
The Sun and Moon thy lamps,
The galaxy of stars
Are as pearls scattered.

The woods of sandal are thy incense
The forests thy flowers
But what worship is this,
O Destroyer of Fear?

The Guru or the Teacher

God being an abstraction, godliness is conceived more as an attribute than a concrete entity that can be acquired by a person or a thing. The way of acquiring godliness or salvation is to obey the will of God. The means of ascertaining God's will are, as in other theological systems, unspecified and subject to human speculation. They are largely rules of moral conduct, which are the basis of human society. Sikh religion advocates association with men of religion for guidance. Hence the importance of the guru or the teacher and the institution of discipleship.

Sikhs do not worship human beings as reincarnations of God. The Gurus themselves repeated that they were like other human beings and were on no account to be worshipped. Guru Nanak constantly referred to himself as the slave and servant of God. Guru Gobind Singh, who was the author of most of the Sikh practice and ritual, was conscious of the danger of having divinity imposed on him by his followers. He explained his mission in life:

For though my thoughts were lost in prayer
At the feet of Almighty God,
I was ordained to establish a sect and lay down
its rules.
But whosoever regards me as Lord
Shall be damned and destroyed.
I am – and of this let there be no doubt –
I am but a slave to God, as other men are,
A beholder of the wonders of creation.

In another passage, he refuted claims to divinity and reincarnation made by others:

God has no friends or enemies.
He heeds no hallelujahs nor cares about cures.
Being the first and timeless
How could he manifest himself through those
Who are born and die?

Godliness being the aim of human endeavour, the lives and teachings of the Gurus are looked upon as aids towards its attainment.

The Granth Sahib

The compilation of the Granth Sahib was largely the work of the fifth Guru, Arjun Dev, and his disciple Bhai Gurdas. This compilation is known as the Adi Granth, the first scripture, to distinguish it from the Dasam Granth, the tenth scripture of the tenth Guru, Gobind

Singh, which was compiled by his disciple Bhai Mani Singh.

By the ordinance of Guru Gobind Singh himself, the Adi Granth alone was given the status of the Holy Scripture as a symbolic representation of all the ten Gurus. His own Dasam Granth is read with reverence, but does not form part of ritual except at the ceremony of baptism.

The Adi Granth or the Granth Sahib contains the writings of the first five Gurus, the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, and the couplet by Guru Gobind Singh. A fair part of the book, however, consists of the writings of Hindu and Muslim saints of the time, chiefly those of Kabir. The compositions of bards who accompanied the different Gurus are also incorporated in it.

The language used by the Sikh Gurus was Punjabi of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Other writings are in old Hindi, Persian, Gujarati, Maharathi and other dialects of northern India. The whole work is set to the measure of classical Indian music with the number of the author Guru appearing first. All the Gurus used the literary nom de plume 'Nanak' at the end of each verse.

All the words appearing in each line are joined together, causing considerable confusion in the interpretation of the text. It is frequently impossible to tell whether there is one word or two words put together. Despite this, the Granth Sahib is a unique historical document. It is perhaps the only kind of writing of a

scriptural nature that has preserved without embellishment or misconstruction the original writings of the religious leaders. It has saved the literary works of other poets of the time from the vagaries of human memory.

The Granth Sahib is the central object of Sikh worship and ritual. In all gurudwaras, copies of the Granth are placed under a canopy. The book itself is draped in cloth – usually embroidered. It is opened with prayer and ceremony each morning and in the evening. Worshippers appear before it barefooted and with their heads covered. They make obeisance by rubbing their foreheads on the ground before it. Offerings of money or food are placed on the cloth draping the book.

A ceremony of non-stop reading of the Granth Sahib by relays of worshippers, known as the Akhand Paath, takes two days and nights and is performed on important religious festivals and private functions. A simpler ceremony is the Saptah Paath, a cover-to-cover reading in seven days. This is frequently undertaken in homes with private chapels where assistance from outside is not easily available.

Sikh children are given a name beginning with the first letter appearing on the page at which the Granth may open. Sikh youth are baptized with the recitation of prayers in front of the Granth. Sikh couples are married to the singing of hymns from the Granth while they walk round it four times. Hymns are read aloud in a dying person's ears and on cremation they are chanted as the

flames consume the body. Despite all this, the Granth Sahib is not like the idol in a Hindu temple or the cross in a Catholic church. It is the source and not the object of prayer or worship. Sikhs revere it because it contains the teachings of their Gurus. It is more a book of divine wisdom than the word of God.

Pilgrimage

Sikhs neither believe in 'sacred' rivers and mountains nor do they pray to stone images. 'To worship an image, to make a pilgrimage to a shrine, to remain in a desert, and yet have the mind impure, is all in vain. To be saved, worship only the truth' (Nanak).

Two incidents in Guru Nanak's life illustrate his attitude towards pilgrimage. One morning he went to the river Ganga, where devout Hindus were bathing and throwing water towards the rising sun as an offering to their dead ancestors. Nanak faced the other way and threw water in the opposite direction. When questioned, he said: 'I am watering my fields in Punjab. If you can send water to the dead in heaven, it should be easier for one to send it to another place on the earth.'

On another occasion, he happened to fall asleep with his feet towards Mecca. An outraged mullah (a Muslim well versed with Islamic theology and law) woke him up and drew his attention to the fact. Nanak simply said: 'If you think I show disrespect by having my feet towards God's house, you turn them in some other direction where God does not dwell.'

Although there are no places or occasions marked out for pilgrimage, Sikhs assemble on the birthday of the Gurus at their places of birth. The martyrdom of the fifth Guru, Arjun Dev, used to be celebrated at mammoth gatherings of Sikhs at Lahore and is today celebrated in Delhi and some other parts of India. The more important shrines – the birthplace of Guru Nanak (now in Pakistan), the site of Guru Arjun's execution at Lahore, the temples at Amritsar and Taran Taran (in Indian Punjab), the birth place of Guru Gobind Singh at Patna and the site of his death in Nanded (in Maharashtra) – are visited by Sikhs at all possible times.

Death and Life Hereafter

Sikhism accepts the Hindu theory of karma and life hereafter. It holds that there is rebirth after death and that the form of the re-created being is determined by his or her action in life; that a person may escape the vicious circle of death and rebirth by righteous living and thus achieve salvation:

He who made the night and day,
The days of the week and the seasons,
He who made the breeze blow, the waters run,
The fires and the lower regions,
Made the earth – the temple of law.
He who made creatures of diverse kinds
With a multitude of names,
Made this the law –

By thought and deed be judged forsooth,
For God is true and dispenseth truth.
There the elect his court adorn,
And God himself their actions honours.
There are sorted deeds that were done and bore
fruit
From those that to action could never ripen.
This, O Nanak, shall hereafter happen.

(Nanak)

Society

Sikh tradition elevates society to the status of the lawgiver and the judge. The last Guru devised means by which the will of society could be ascertained and enforced. A resolution (*mata*) passed by elected representatives of the congregation (*sangat*) became a *gurumata* (the order of the Guru). A *gurumata* could even dispense with forms and conventions initiated by the Gurus themselves.

Priesthood

The Sikhs do not have priests. All adults, irrespective of status or sex, are competent to perform religious ceremonies. A class of professional scripture readers (*granthis*) and musicians (*raagis*) has come into existence, but they function mainly in big cities, where the size of the congregation renders some sort of institutionalism necessary.

The Caste System

The Sikh religion does not recognize the caste system. Guru Nanak chose a Muslim musician who would normally be beyond the pale of the caste system as a companion. Nanak's writings abound with passages describing as ungodly the conduct of those who condemn God's creatures to untouchability. For instance:

> There are ignoble amongst the noblest,
> And pure amongst the despised.
> The former shalt thou avoid.
> And be the dust under the foot of the other.

The second Guru, Angad, said:

> The Hindus say there are four castes
> But they are all of one seed.
> 'Tis like clay of which pots are made
> In diverse shapes and forms – yet the clay is the same.
> So is the body of man made of five elements.
> How can one amongst them be high and another low?

Guru Gobind's first five disciples included three who were from the lower castes. With determined deliberation, he said that he would mix the four castes into one – like

the four constituents of *paan* (betel), which when chewed, produce just one colour.

Prayer

A feature of the Sikh religion, which is particularly striking, is its emphasis on prayer. The form of prayer is usually the repetition of the name of God and in chanting hymns of praise. This was popularized by the Bhakti cult, and Sikhism is its chief exponent today. The Sikh scriptures abound with the exhortation to repeat 'the True Name' as purification from sin and impious thoughts:

> As hands or feet besmirched with slime,
> Water washes white;
> As garments dark with grime
> Rinsed with soap are made light;
> So when sin soils the soul
> Prayer alone shall make it whole.
>
> Words do not the saint or sinner make,
> Action alone is written in the book of fate,
> What we sow that alone we take;
> O Nanak, be saved or for ever transmigrate.
>
> (Nanak)

At the same time, there are positive injunctions against austere asceticism involving renunciation of society, celibacy and penance. All the Gurus led normal family

lives and discharged secular functions as householders and as the spiritual mentors of their people. The concept of righteous living is meaningless except in the context of the community. There is constant reference to being in the world but not worldly. The ideal is to achieve saintliness as a member of society and to lead a spiritual existence with the necessary material requisites (*raj mein jog kamayo*):

> Religion lieth not in the patched coat the Yogi wears,
> Not in the staff he bears,
> Nor in the ashes on his body.
> Religion lieth not in rings in the ears,
> Not in a shaven head,
> Nor in the blowing of the conch shell.
> If thou must the path of true religion see
> Amongst the world's impurities, be of impurities free.
>
> (Nanak)

Pacifism and the Use of Force

Sikh pacifism in religion and Sikh militarism present a contradiction, which can only be explained by a reference to history. A strictly pacifist faith is difficult to reconcile with a spartan military tradition, except through the formula that when the faith itself is threatened with

extinction, force may be used to preserve it. This indeed was Guru Gobind Singh's explanation of the steps he took. In a Persian couplet, he said:

Chu kar uz hama har heel te dar guzusht
Halal ust burdan ba shamsheer dust.
(When all other means have failed,
it is righteous to draw the sword.)

It is possible that if the state of affairs in the Punjab had returned to a peaceful normality, the Sikh sword might have been sheathed and the gospel of Nanak, which preached peace and humanity, would have become symbolic of the Sikh faith. As it was, the period following Guru Gobind Singh was about the most turbulent known to Indian history. The decaying Mughal Empire took to making scapegoats of minorities to explain away its failures. There were pogroms of unprecedented savagery in which the small band of Sikhs was almost exterminated. Coincident with persecution within the country, came new Muslim invasions from the north, which destroyed any people or institution they deemed unIslamic. In such circumstances, martial traditions were forged, which became an integral part of the Sikh life and gave the Sikhs the reputation of being a fighting people.

Chapter Seven

Sikh Prayers

Cleanliness and purity are not contained in the way we cook or eat our food but in what is in our hearts. It is in what we behold with our eyes, hear with our ears, taste with our tongues and do with our limbs that make us pure or impure. All else is superstition and delusion.

Japji

Japji is the most important prayer of the Sikhs. It was recognized as such by the fifth Guru, Arjun Dev (1563–1606), when he compiled the Adi Granth and gave it the first place in the sacred anthology. According to tradition when some disciples complained that the language of Japji was too involved and needed to be elucidated through explanatory hymns, Guru Arjun replied that the entire Adi Granth was but an elucidation of Japji.

We are not quite certain of the circumstances and the date of the composition of Japji. According to most Janamsakhis (literally birth stories), the opening lines were recited by Guru Nanak during his mystical experience at Sultanpur (in Punjab) when he disappeared in the river Bein. This would make Japji amongst Nanak's earliest compositions, i.e., before he set out on his distant voyages, sometime between A.D. 1500 and 1507.

Most Sikh scholars do not accept this version of the Janamsakhis and are of the opinion that Japji as well as other compositions by Guru Nanak such as Asa di Var, Siddha Goshta and Barah Mah show a maturity of style and thought-content that indicate their having been composed after the Guru had finished his travels and had settled down at Kartarpur in Punjab. The Sikh

scholar, Dr Mohan Singh, cites a seventeenth-century manuscript, which states that while the Guru was at Kartarpur, he was summoned to the presence of God and ordered to compose the Japji. He accordingly addressed his chief disciple and destined successor, Angad, in the following words: 'Man, it is the command of the great Creator that I must compose a hymn of praise.' Whereupon Nanak handed the entire treasury of his own compositions to Angad with the behest: 'Now it is for you to make up the *jap*.' And then in Nanak's presence, Angad arranged the verses in order to make up the *jap*. He selected 38 verses out of Nanak's compositions to get the essence of his teaching. According to Dr Mohan Singh and well-known Sikh academic, Professor Sahib Singh, the probable date of the composition of the verses of the Japji in the order they appear today was A.D. 1532, seven years before the Guru's death.

Japji follows the traditional pattern of compositions of the times beginning with an invocation to God (*mangalacharan*) and ending with thanksgiving on the successful completion of the work.

Japji opens with a statement on the nature of God: His uniqueness, omnipotence, immortality, and so on, and reaffirms His being both Truth and Reality. It concludes with another statement to the effect that knowledge of God is obtained only through the grace of the Guru. Here is the *mool* mantra (root or seed mantra) of the Sikh faith: *Ik onkaar satnaam karathaa purakh*

nirabho niravair akaal moorath ajoonee saibha(n) gur prasaad. These lines precede all Sikh prayers as *mangalacharan,* exactly as Bismillah-hir-Rahman-i-Raheem – in the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful – appears before every chapter of the Quran. They are the standard forms of *diksha* (gift) that a guru gives to his disciple on initiation (guru mantra).

The next few lines restate the *mool* mantra re-emphasizing the timeless and *sat* (meaning both Truth and Reality) qualities of God. Thereafter begins the *jap*.

The quest for Truth is stated in the first verse. Since the aim of life is to know God and be united with Him and neither thinking, nor meditation, nor penance, nor any other device reveals the secret, how can we tear the veil of illusion that covers our eyes and get to know the Truth? The rest of the verses are an answer to these questions with various diversions from the theme of how to observe the ordinances of God. Four verses at the end (34 to 37) indicate the steps by which man progresses to spiritual emancipation. Starting from the earth, which is the realm of law, he proceeds to acquire learning in the realm of knowledge, the second stage. The third stage is the realm of beauty and the fourth the realm of action. The journey ends in the realm of truth, and merger with God. The last verse of Japji sums up all that it takes to achieve perfection: self-control, patience, knowledge, fear of God and love of God and earnest prayer:

There is One God
His Name is Truth.
He is the Creator,
He is without fear and without hate.
He is beyond time Immortal,
His Spirit pervades the universe.
He is not born,
Nor does He die to be born again,
He is self-existent.
By the Guru's grace shalt thou worship Him.

Asa di Var

Asa di Var is a collection of hymns meant to be sung in the hours of the dawn. It is composed in the form of a heroic ballad (*var*) and is set to the musical mode of the Raga Asa. It is divided into *slokas* (staves) and *pauris* (stanzas) following one another alternately as a statement and a commentary thereon. Except for a few verses of the second Guru, Angad, the work is entirely that of Guru Nanak.

In Asa di Var, as in his other compositions, the Guru did not restrict himself to a single theme or a logical development of a particular thesis. Nevertheless, the one idea that redominates this work is how man can elevate himself from his low state to a godly one and thus prepare himself for union with God. Some passages of this Asa di Var were inspired by the Mundaka and the Katha Upanishads. This work is severely critical of the Hindu's

ambivalence: his pretence of orthodoxy on the one hand and sycophantic imitation of Muslim (foreign) customs to please the ruling class on the other.

Asa di Var opens with praise for the Guru, who, by bringing out the best in man, can make him Godlike. Anyone who thinks he can do without the Guru is doomed to failure. Here are some excerpts from Asa di Var:

God first created the world and glorified His own Name. Then He sat Himself upon His prayer mat to enjoy His creation.

All that God has created, the cosmos and the laws by which they are governed, are true, just and real. Let us glorify His Name for He alone is immortal and bountiful. He can read our innermost secrets. We cannot comprehend His ways. He put life into things that have life, gave them different names and assigned them different functions and will judge them accordingly.

We are limited in our comprehension of God-made phenomena – sights, sounds, colours, winds, waters, fire, forms of life, tastes, patterns of behaviour, etc. All we can do is to marvel at them and shower praise on God.

Left to himself, man would consume himself in lust and thus waste his sojourn on earth.

All that is in the world whether animate or inanimate – breeze, streams, fires, clouds, the sun and the moon, mortals and supermen – abide in the fear of God. God alone is free of fear. God alone is beyond reckoning of time. Gods like Rama and Krishna were like jugglers who displayed their tricks in the market place and packed up to leave when their performance was over.

Divine knowledge is not found by wandering about the streets; it comes by the grace of God. By God's grace man finds a true teacher (*satguru*) who whispers the divine word (*sabda*) into the disciple's ear and helps him overcome his ego.

God Himself created both reality and illusion: we have to learn how to distinguish between the two. We cannot do this by performing ritual, for ritual is like a whirlwind of meaningless activity, but only by abiding in the fear of God. Those who fear the Lord, cherish the Lord in their hearts.

Thou art Formless; Thy name preserves us from hell. Death is inevitable. No one can stop the march of time. However much we try to disguise the onset of years, age will manifest itself in some way or other.

There are different forms of worship – the Muslims' and the Hindus'; the celibates' and the householders'. No one is in a position to ridicule

another's customs. Muslims say that because the Hindus burn their dead they go to hell. They do not realize that the clay a potter fires in his oven is compounded of earth in which dead Muslims have been buried.

Without the intercession of the *satguru* no one has, nor ever will, find God because God manifests Himself in the *satguru* and speaks through him.

Ego is the root of all evil. Until we overcome the ego we shall continue to stumble in ignorance without finding the true path. We can overcome ego and find the path of truth by serving and worshipping God, by forsaking evil, by performing good deeds and by being abstemious in what we eat and drink.

Since God created everyone and everything we should leave the cares of the world to Him. Performance of ritual, good deeds, giving of alms, going on pilgrimages, meditation, fighting for righteous causes, etc., are of little avail if there is no divine grace.

Only the *satguru* can tell us how to find God and cherish truth. Those who think they can do this by themselves are foolish and waste their lives without even knowing why they were born. No amount of book learning can teach us this supreme truth. Book learning only boosts the ego. Performance of a pilgrimage only makes a

person sanctimonious. Subjecting the body to penance does little good as the sense of selfhood can only be eradicated by the divine word (*sabda*). True worshippers (bhaktas) understand this and are forever singing praises of the Lord. They know that all else, be it in terms of power or of wealth, is illusory. They know the futility of loving human beings who are on the earth but for a brief spell; they know that man is not cleansed by washing or wearing clean garments but only after the filth of falsehood is rinsed out of his system and his heart becomes the temple of Love.

A man becomes pure when he sees the light of God in all that is lit, when he shows mercy and charity towards his fellow-creatures.

Beg for a pinchful of dust off the feet of the faithful, smear it on your forehead, in single-minded meditation think of the One. Your labours will surely bear fruit.

We live in a dark age (Kalyuga) when greed and lust are the ruling passions, our scholars have no learning, our warriors no valour and all are concerned only with their selfish interests. We do not realize that God knows our innermost secrets and we shall get what we deserve.

Pain is often the panacea for our ills. Comfort can be a curse for those who live in ease and think not of God.

Just as a pitcher, which can only be made with hard clay, can contain water, so can the mind contain knowledge but it needs divine knowledge that the guru gives to make the right kind of mind. If the learned know not these truths, how can we blame those who have no pretence to learning?

Just as the rosary has one big bead in the centre, so do human beings have a chief characteristic. Likewise, each epoch has been marked by its own special feature. An epoch can be compared to a chariot and its charioteer. The four Vedas of the Hindus were contemporaneous with different gods and prevailed in different epochs. We are now in the dark age when the predominant Veda is the Atharva, the dominant god is the Allah of Islam and the predominant customs are those of the Muslims whom the Hindus imitate in dress and deportment.

The only way of escape from the evils of the Kalyuga is to find a *satguru* whose teaching is like a salve of knowledge for the eyes.

Be not deluded by appearance. Take, for example, the silk-cotton tree. It is huge, straight as an arrow and has an enormous spread. Yet neither its leaves nor its flowers nor its fruits are of any use to anyone. In humility lies sweetness and greatness. See that when weighed in a pair of heavier scales, the object which is nearer the base is the heavier.

Exhibition of religiosity, parrot-like repetition of sacred texts, daubing the forehead with saffron, etc., [are] of little avail if there is no truth in the heart.

We come into this world with a clean slate and thereafter gain or lose according to whether we do good or evil. We return as naked as we came and if our record is bad we go into the jaws of hell to repent our deeds. The Hindus wear a sacred thread (*janeau*). This *janeau* can be soiled, burnt, lost or broken. Why not make a sacred thread of mercy, contentment, discipline and truth?

Hindus hire Brahmins to whisper sacred formulae in their ears and perform religious ritual for them. Brahmins perish. How can they save others when they cannot save themselves?

See how low the Hindu has fallen! He talks of the sanctity of the Brahmin and the cow and at the same time apes the customs and manners of his Muslim masters in order to gain favour with them. Such are the wearers of the sacred thread. They have no sense of shame because they trade in deceit and falsehood. Be not misled by the caste marks on their foreheads, their fancy *dhotis*, their fussiness over the place where they cook their food or what they eat is impure. They cannot wash the evil within them by rinsing their mouths.

God thinks of everyone and assigns a function to each one. If even a mighty king were to go against divine ordinances, he would be reduced to fodder.

If a thief offers what he has thieved for the souls of his dead forefathers, will they not be charged with theft? Will not the priest who performed the obsequial ceremony be punished?

Falsehood comes as naturally to a liar as the menstrual period to a woman. After her period a woman cleans herself by washing her body; but falsehood can only be cleansed by enshrining God in our hearts.

The rich and the powerful who indulge their whims in things they fancy – fleet-footed horses, beautiful women, large mansions – often forget, till old age overtakes them, that death which is inevitable will put an end to everything.

Cleanliness and purity are not contained in the way we cook or eat our food but in what is in our hearts. It is in what we behold with our eyes, hear with our ears, taste with our tongues and do with our limbs that make us pure or impure. All else is superstition and delusion.

Praise the *satguru* as the greatest of mortals for it is he who teaches you to tread the path of righteousness. He exorcizes the evil within you and prepares you for union with God.

First let us cleanse ourselves; otherwise, however fastidious we may be in the way we cook our food, it will be as unclean as if someone had spat into it.

Do not denigrate your women for they are conceived and born as men are conceived and born. We befriend, wed and go unto them. Why slander the sex which gives birth to kings? All who live are born of women; only God (who is Truth and Reality) owes not His existence to any woman.

Everyone speaks of himself; mark the one who says nothing of himself in his talk.

Everyone must pay for what he does; everyone must fulfil his destiny.

Knowing how brief is our sojourn on the earth, why should we flaunt our pride?

Speak not evil of any man and engage not in argument with a fool.

The slanderer's shafts only poison his own body and soul. No one will give sanctuary to the slanderer; people will spit on him, call him a fool and beat him with their shoes. One who is false in his heart but manages to earn respect and fame is an impostor. He is worse off than a beggar, who, although he may be in rags, has attached himself to God, is carefree and rich of heart.

What is in the heart will come out of the mouth. If you sow seeds of poison, do not expect to reap a harvest of nectar.

We shall never get to know God because He is infinite. His is all the power. He puts the chains of slavery round the necks of some, gives others fleet-footed horses to ride. Since He is the Doer of all things, to whom shall we make complaint?

He is the Divine Potter who designed our bodies as vessels. Some He fills with delicious milk; others He lets simmer over the fire; some men are destined to slumber on comfortable couches; others to spend their nights keeping watch over those that are sleeping.

How can we evaluate the greatness of the Greatest One? He is beneficent; He is merciful; He is bountiful and provides for everyone. Let your acts be good, your earnings pleasing to Him. Do only that which will merit the pleasure of the Lord.

Purkhan birkhan teerthan tattan meghan khetan ...

Mankind and arbours
Places of pilgrimage by river banks
Clouds that float over farmers' fields
Islands and spheres,
Continents and the universe, the entire cosmos.
All that is born of egg and womb,
Born of water and sweat
Of all these He alone hath estimate.

O Nanak, He knows the oceans and the
mountains
He knows the masses of mankind
O Nanak, He who gave life to creatures
He will keep them in His mind.
He who makes must take care of what He hath
made!
Let the cares of the world He made be His worry.
To Him make obeisance, to Him be victory!
May His court be in eternal session!
O Nanak, if we have not the True Name
Worthless is the mark on the forehead,
Worthless too the sacred thread.

Siddha Goshta

Siddha Goshta is based on a dialogue said to have taken place between Guru Nanak and a band of yogis who came to visit him either at Achal Batala* (a place near Kartarpur in Punjab) or at Gorakh Hatri (a place probably in present-day Uttarakhand).** This dialogue deals largely with the respective merits of Hath Yoga advocated by yogic followers of Guru Gorakhnath and Namamarga (the path of the divine word) preached by the Guru. In this composition, the Guru also spells out in greater detail his notion of terms like *sahaj* (harmony

* Bhai Gurudas Var I, *paudi* 39–44. *Paudi* literally means step.
**Puratan Janamsakhi.

or balance) and *sunya* (vacuity or nothingness) as well as the personalities of the Guru and a *gurmukh* (a follower of the guru).

Selections from Nanak's dialogue with the yogis (Raga Ramkali):

> The yogis took their seats on their prayer mats.
> And spake in chorus:
> Our salutations to this holy assemblage!
>
> I salute Him who is the Truth, replied Nanak,
> Who is Infinite, Who is without any limit.
> Fain would I sever my head with my own hand
> And lay it at His feet!
> To Him I dedicate my body and my soul.
> Truth is however also found in the company of
> the holy
> And through them the soul is led by the path of
> *sahaj* to glory.
> But what use is it to wander in the wilderness?
> Through truth alone is true purification
> Without the True Word there is no salvation.
>
> Who art thou? the yogis asked, What is thy name?
> What path dost thou pursue?
> What is thy life's aim?
> Pray tell us all, to us be true.

To men of God my life be sacrificed,
Nanak made obeisance and replied.

Where is thy seat? persisted the yogis,
Son, where is thy home?
From where hast thou come?
Where wilt thou go when thou goest away?
Thou hadst renounced the world to become a
wandering hermit,
What path wilt thou pursue, tell us we pray?

He that dwells in every heart
Within Him I've made my seat, replied Nanak.
Whichever way I'm directed by the true guru
That is the path I pursue.
Gently did I come from God
To God shall I return
Nanak shall forever live according to His will.
My seat is my prayer mat
I worship the immortal Narayana.
This was I taught by my guru
Through the guru did I come to know myself
And merged myself in the Truest of the True.

Then spake one of them, called Charpat Yogi:
They say the world is like a turbulent sea
A sea which no one can swim over.
How then can we find the other shore?
Nanak, detached from the world dost thou live

Ponder over the problem and the true answer
give.

Nanak replied: When someone poses a question
in such form
That the question itself contains the answer;
What answer can anyone give such a question?
If you claim to have reached the other shore
Why ponder over this problem any more?
As the lotus in the water is not wet
Nor the water fowl sporting in a stream
Fix your mind on the guru's words and thus,
Says Nanak, cross the world's sea to your Lord
Supreme.
He who in a crowd can be alone
In a multitude of desires is without desire
Such a one has access to the Inaccessible
And knows the Unknowable.
Having himself had the vision
He shows others to see
Nanak is the slave of such a one.

Master, listen to me, pleaded one,
Be not offended by my question!
How does one reach the gate of the house of the
guru?
Much have I pondered over this problem, I tell
thee true.

This mind of ours is restless, said Nanak
It is brought to rest by the anchor of the Name
Then does it find its true abode and resting place
The Creator unites it with Himself and thus
Is conceived love for the truth (by His grace).

Shun the shops and highways of the cities,
Amidst trees of forests go and stay
Wild roots and berries be the food you eat
Sages who know say this is the way.
Go bathe at places of pilgrimage
Go pluck the fruits of peace
The filth of the world will not soil you.
If union with God be your goal, says Loharipa,
son of Gorakhnath,
This is the only way of life as you will see.

Among shops and highways may you live
Only be vigilant and never slumber
Let not your mind stay and dwell
On the wife or wealth of a stranger.
Without the Name the mind will never be stable
Nor, says Nanak, from worldly hankerings be
ever free
My guru has shown me cities and shops within
my heart.
There can I easily trade and earn truthful gain.
Says Nanak, the essence of asceticism, let it be
understood,

Is to abstain from too much sleep and too much
food.

Examine the schools of philosophy
Accept one that is pre-eminent
Wear rings in your ears and
The hermit's cloak on your person.
Carry the beggar's bowl
Of the twelve orders choose one
Of the six schools to one subscribe
If you take my advice, my son,
You will be spared the buffeting of chance
The sage achieves the goal of divine union.
Let the divine word be always within you
Overcome your ego, erase attachment to worldly
things
The guru's word will help you conquer
Pride in self, lust and anger.
What means the patched cloak and begging
bowl?
It's better to know that the spirit of God pervades
Nanak knows that only God can save
He is the Truth, His name is True
I found this by testing the words of the guru.
Instead of putting upside down your begging
bowl
Turn your back on worldly things.
Little use is it to wear the yogi's cap upon your
head.

From the five elements take their quality
Instead of a mattress to preserve you from dust
Keep your body clean by acts of purity
Instead of a jockstrap to check your lust
Bend your mind towards chastity
Truth, tranquillity and self-control be ever your guides
Says Nanak, learn from the guru, the Name
Ever abides.

Who is hidden in all things?
Who attains the gates of paradise?
Whose body and soul blend with God?
What comes to life at birth?
What dies when a man dies?
Whose spirit pervades the three regions
The nether world, the earth and the skies?

God is hidden in all things.
Those that serve Him attain the gates of paradise
Those bodies and souls
Are permeated with the divine Word
Blend their light with the Light of God.
Evil-doers perish [and] are reborn only to die
Men of God merge with the True One

Why are some to worldly values bound?
Why do they let themselves be swallowed by maya's [illusion] serpent?

How is the soul lost? How is it found?
How does one become pure?
How is the mind's darkness dispelled?
On these if you give us answers true,
We'll acknowledge you as our guru.

Because of evil counsel to worldly values are we
bound
We throw ourselves in the maws of maya's serpent
Evil-doers lose their souls, by the godly are they
found
Those who find the true guru, dispel the darkness
in their minds.
They erase their egos and are merged into God.

If in *sunya*'s trance you still yourself, a yogi said,
Your soul will stop its swan-like wayward flight,
Your body will not like a rotten wall crumble
and fall dead.

In the calm of *sahaj's* cave
You can discover the True One,
Sayeth Nanak, the True One loves the truthful.

What prompted you to leave your home
And become a wandering *udasi* [a saint who has
renounced the world]?
Why wear you this hermit's garb?
What is the merchandise in your store?

How will you take us to the opposite shore?

In search of the saintly men
I became a wandering *udasi,*
In the hope of getting a vision of the Divine
I donned this hermit's garb.
Truth is all the merchandise I have in my store,
Nanak says, with the saintly shall we get to the
opposite shore.

Man, by what devices did you change the course
destined for you?
How single-minded[ly] did you this aim pursue?
How did you worldly hopes and desires eschew?
How did you find the divine light within
yourself?
A man who knows no yoga is like a man without
teeth.
Life is hard as steel, how can he bite on it and
live?
Nanak, ponder over these questions and the right
answers give.

Since I was born in the house of the true guru
I escaped the wheel of death and rebirth.
The destined course of my life was thus changed.
I heard divine music and was entranced
And became single-minded in my pursuit.
My mundane hopes and aspirations did I burn

In the fire of the divine Word; to the guru I turn
To find the divine light within me burn.
Erase the three-tiered division of article and
action
And you will grow teeth that will bite on steel,
Nanak says, He is the ferryman, He'll ferry you
across to salvation.

What are your views on the beginning of
creation?
Where did the Creator-in-trance then reside?
What were the first glimmerings of knowledge?
What does in all our hearts abide?
This terrible blot of death how can we burn?
How [to] be fearless when to our final home we
turn?
How do we find the seat of *sahaj* and
contentment?
By what means can our enemies be slain?

With the guru's words purge the poison of the
ego
There will you find real place of rest
He who through the Word learns of the Creator
[and] of this Creation
Him will Nanak serve as a slave (for he is blest).

Where does man come from?
Where does he go when he dies?

Where does he rest when he attains salvation?
One who can answer these questions is a real
seer.
A guru with no failing, a guru without a peer.
How can we find the reality of the Ineffable?
How do we cultivate love for the guru's words?
Nanak, reflect and your views state on these
questions
How does the Creator evaluate His creations?

By divine command does man come into the
world.
By divine command does he depart.
By divine command he remains merged in God.
From the true guru does he learn
The wage of truth to earn.
Through the divine word he achieves salvation.

The beginning of the beginning staggers the
imagination.
It can only be described as indescribable wonder.
In the profound stillness of *sunya*
God came to indwell within Himself.

Through the guru's instruction free yourself of
desires.
Let triumph over desires be the emblem you wear.
Know that in every heart that beats
The Lord of life hath His mansion.

It is through the guru's teaching
We merge in[to] the Formless One.
By the gentle path of *sahaj*
Attain God, purest of the pure.
A disciple who serves his guru and no other
Will succeed, says Nanak, that is sure.
He who questions not the divine command
But accepts it as a wonder beyond seeing
Will understand the reality of things and beings.
He who effaces his ego
Of attachments is made free
Within whose heart is truth enshrined
He alone is a real yogi.
He the formless and the immaculate
From *nirguna* – without attributes
Became *saguna* – with attributes.

Hereafter, the question-and-answer pattern of Siddha Goshta becomes somewhat confused. There are some soliloquies, sometimes repetitive, interrupted by further questions – also frequently repetitive. I have consequently thought it best to summarize the contents of the longer passages and reproduce only a selected few:

> Nanak states that the service of the guru has its reward in the union with God. This is achieved through knowledge of truth, removal of doubt and duality and the conquest of desires. While the saintly merge with God, the self-willed spend

their days without finding any moorings, i.e., the guru's instruction; they stumble along the path of evil, they are not united with God but continue in the cycle of death and rebirth.

The saintly (*gurmukh*) not only achieve godliness for themselves, but they are also able to instruct and influence others to take to the path of moral rectitude. It is not necessary to be an ascetic or a celibate to achieve union with God: one can lead a life of prayer and devotion doing one's ordinary work and discharging obligations to one's family.

The way to salvation lies through the divine word (*sabda*) and the worship of the name of God – *nam simran*. One who is imbued with the name of God conquers his ego and achieves salvation through union with God. Being imbued with the name of God is therefore more rewarding than performing penances, acquiring occult power or book learning.

'How did life begin?' asked one yogi.

'With air we drew in our first breath,' replied Nanak.

'You exhort everyone to take a guru,' said another, 'who is your guru?'

Nanak replied: 'The *sabda* or the divine word is my teacher. Through the *sabda* I worship God by ceaseless adoration. Through the *sabda* I know God, through the *sabda* I live in the world

without being infected by the world's values; the *sabda* helps me overcome my ego.'

'If teeth are made of wax, how can they bite on steel?' asked the yogis, meaning thereby that the path to salvation is hard and one must steel oneself by ascetic austerities to be able to tread it. 'How can one live in a house of snow when one's clothes are aflame?' they asked, meaning thereby that the soul, since it is encased in a body subject to passions, has little chance of salvation. 'Where can one find a cave wherein the mind can be tranquil?' they asked.

Nanak replied: 'If you exorcize the ego, doubt and duality, you will grow teeth strong enough to bite on steel. Flames of passion can be dowsed by the consciousness of God within. Fear of God destroys pride of self. As soon as the divine word *sabda* and God find a place in the heart, mind and body are cleansed, the venomous fires of lust and anger are put out and so is man prepared to receive the grace of God.'

The yogis continued their questions in cryptic form: 'Wherefrom comes the light of the moon which is itself only the house of snows and shadows? And wherefrom does the sun get its searing heat? How can the mind (moon) and the reason (sun being the symbol of knowledge) overcome the fear of death?'

Nanak replied: 'The repetition of *sabda* illumines the mind with radiance; from the guru learn to treat joy and sorrow with equal indifference and the fear of death will cease to gnaw into your vitals. Above all, know *nama* – *the* name of God. With *nama* overcome sorrow and fear of death, dispel doubt and duality. Worship *nama* as you breathe till breathing becomes like an Aeolian harp [an ancient wind instrument]. Then with a thunderclap will open the tenth orifice [the human body has nine orifices] and eternal light come flooding in. Thus will you be gently merged in God. You will attain *sunya* which is also the fourth state – *turiya avastha. Sunya* is the great stillness within and without and pervades the three regions. It is in the state of *sunya* that a human being is identified with God.'

On being further questioned on the status of those who attained *sunya*, Nanak replied: 'They are like the Creator who created them outside the wheel of birth, death and rebirth; they hear the beat of drum unbeaten by hand and are in tune with the Infinite.'

The guru further elucidated the difference between the *gurmukh* (the saintly), who in their humility accept guidance from a guru, and the *manmukh* who burn in conceit and never get to know the essence of reality.

The yogis questioned Nanak on the validity of their own beliefs: 'What is the mantra which helps man cross the fearful ocean of life? Where does human breath (life) which the yogis believe when exhaled goes the length of ten fingers from the nostrils reside? How can the mind be made stable? How can we see something which is admittedly beyond the range of vision?'

'The divine mantra is within us,' the guru replied. 'God is invisible as the air and like it everywhere about us. God is born *nirguna* (without attributes) and *saguna* (with attributes). The mind is purified and stabilized when it becomes the abode of *nama*. The guru will teach you how to cross the fearful ocean of life and prove that God in life is the same as God in the life hereafter. Although He has no form or colour and casts no shadow, He is not illusory. Our lives (the exhaled breath that the yogis spoke of) are sustained by God.

'In order to discover the invisible and infinite God, it is vital that we rise above the threefold nature of qualities and actions (*satvik, rajsik* and *tamsik*),* through the *sabda,* rid the mind of ego and pride, acknowledge God as the one and only Master and cultivate love for Him. Then by His

*Equivalent to pure, active and sluggish, respectively.

grace shall we have the mystical experience of partaking of union with Him.'

'If air is the substance of life,' asked the yogis, 'wherefrom does air itself draw sustenance?'

'*Sabda* is the true sustenance of life,' replied Nanak. The guru then expounded his views on the importance of prayer, self-control, truth and grace. 'Hunger for truth consumes other hungers and removes sorrow,' assured Nanak.

The yogis continued their questions: 'When there was neither a heart nor a body, where did the mind and breath reside?'

'In the stillness of *sunya*,' replied Nanak. 'Everyone and everything was a part of God prior to creation. It is the greatest of untold tales.'

'Then tell us how the world came into existence,' they demanded.

Nanak replied:

Out of the ego came the world.
When it forgets the Name it will suffer sorrow;
The saintly think over the essence of knowledge
They burn out their ego in the flame of the divine Word;
Their bodies and souls are cleansed, their speech refined,
They remain blended in the True One.
Through the Name of the Lord (who is nameless) one achieves detachment.

And enshrines the truth within one's mind.
Without the Name there never can be any union
Ponder over this in your heart and mind.

The Guru further expounded his views on the qualities of a *gurmukh*, the importance of *sabda* and *nama* to effect union with God, and the role of the *satguru* as a guide.

The Siddha Goshta ends with the praise of God and a prayer for the gift of His Name.

Chapter Eight

Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh

It is little wonder that Nanak came to be revered as the king or shah of the holy men – the guru of the Hindus and the peer of the Mussalmans .... Guru Gobind Singh was ... a rare combination of many qualities ... who dedicated his life to fighting tyranny; a leader who looked upon his followers as comrades and equals ...

Guru Nanak

On the night of the full moon in the month of Vaisakh in the Samvat (one of the Hindu calendars) version – according to Mehervan's Janamsakhis (birth stories) of Guru Nanak – Tripta, the wife of Mehta Kalian Das Bedi of Talwandi Rae Bhoe, was in labour. Three-quarters of the night had passed. The morning star shone bright in the eastern sky; it was the hour of early dawn when she was delivered of her second child, a son.

Nanak's birth was thus on 15 April 1469. However, in order to continue an old tradition, the event is celebrated on the full moon night in the month of November. As to the place of his birth, it is thought that the name Nanak was given to the child because he was born in the house of his maternal grandparents or *nankey*, which was either in Kalma Kacha or Chalewal, two villages in the district of Lahore (now in Pakistan).

Nanak was a precocious child, smiling and sitting up in early infancy. When he was only five years old, people noticed that he did not play with other boys but spoke words of wisdom well beyond his years. The people's reactions were interesting. Whosoever heard him, Hindu or Muslim, was certain that God spoke through the little boy. This belief grew stronger as Nanak grew older.

At the age of seven, Nanak was taken to a pandit to be taught. Nanak apparently turned the tables on his teacher and his discourse with his teacher is the subject of a beautiful hymn in Sri Raga:

> The only real learning is the worship of God; the rest is of no avail and wisdom devoid of the knowledge of the Creator is but the noose of ignorance about one's neck. He that repeats the name of the Lord in this world will reap his reward in the world to come.
>
> Do you know how and why men come into this world and why they depart? Why some become rich and others poor? Why some hold court while others go begging door to door, and even of the beggars why some receive alms while others do not? Take it from me, O pandit, that those who have enjoyed power and ease in this life and not given praise to the Lord will surely be punished; just as the dhobi (washerman) beats dirty clothes on slabs of stones, so will they be beaten; just as an oilman grinds oilseeds to extract oil will they be ground; just as the miller crushes grain between his millstones will they be crushed. On the other hand, those that are poor and those that have to beg for their living, who spend their lives in prayer, will receive their honour and reward in the divine court of justice.

He that has fear of God is free from all fears. But monarch or commoner, he that fears not God, will be reduced to dust and be reborn to suffer the pangs of hell. That which is gained by falsehood becomes unclean. The only truth is God. Our only love should be for God who is immortal; why love those that will perish – son, wife, power, wealth, youth – all are subject to decay and death.

(Mehervan's Janamsakhi)

A year later, Nanak was sent to the village mosque to learn Arabic and other subjects. Here, too, Nanak astounded his teacher:

> The mullah wrote down the Arabic alphabet from *alif to yea*. Nanak at once mastered the writing and the pronunciation of the letters and within a few days had learnt arithmetic, accounting and everything else the mullah could teach. The mullah marvelled: 'Great God! Other children have been struggling for ten years and cannot tell one letter from another, and this child has by Thy grace learnt all within a matter of days.'

(Mehervan's Janamsakhi)

Nanak was a moody child and often refused to speak to anyone for days on end. He wandered about the woods absorbed in observing the phenomena of nature: the advent of spring with its bees and butterflies; the searing heat of summer that burned up all vegetation followed by the monsoon, which miraculously restored life and turned the countryside green; and the ways of the birds and beasts of the jungle. All this mystery baffled young Nanak's mind and he began to ponder over the character of the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer and to question the efficacy of rituals, both Hindu and Muslim.

When he was only nine, Nanak demanded of the Brahmin priest who had come to invest him with the sacred thread, the *janeau*: 'Do the Brahmins and Kshatriyas lose their faith if they lose their sacred thread? Is their faith maintained by their thread or by their deeds?'

Soon, Nanak was the despair of his parents. He refused to do any kind of work. If he was sent to graze cattle, he let them stray into other people's fields; if he was given money to do trade, he would give it away to the poor and the hungry. He would be saved from the wrath of his father by his mother and sister and by the village folk who bore witness to the many miracles they had seen emanate from Nanak.

At the age of sixteen Nanak was married to Sulakhni, daughter of Mul Chand Chona of Batala. They had two sons, Sri Chand and Lakhmi Das, and perhaps a daughter or daughters, who died in infancy. Family life did not divert Nanak's attention for too long. His moods would

suddenly descend upon him and he would remain silent for many days and then become argumentative on subjects such as God, man, death, rituals and moral values. And he remained as indifferent to making a living as he had been before he became a husband and a father.

One evening in July (says Mehervan's Janamsakhi), the skies over Talwandi were darkened by black monsoon clouds and it began to pour. At night the sky was rent with flashes of lightning and there was a fearful crash of thunder. Nanak began to sing hymns in praise of the Lord. His mother came to him and said: 'Son, it is time you had some sleep.' Just then the cuckoo called 'peeoh, peeoh', and Nanak replied: 'Mother, when my rival is awake, how can I sleep?'

It became evident to the people that it would not be long before Nanak took the hermit's path in search of truth and, once, when a group of holy men happened to pass through Talwandi on their way to a pilgrimage, Nanak's mother expressed her apprehensions: 'I know that one of these days you too will be leaving me to go on a pilgrimage. I do not complain but would like to know what is gained by going to holy places?'

'Nothing,' replied Nanak categorically. 'It is in our own body that we have to build our temples, free our minds from the snares of maya [illusion], renounce evil deeds and give praise to our Maker. This is as good as going to bathe in the sixty-eight holy places of pilgrimage.'

'Then tell these holy men that they pursue the path

of error,' said Nanak's mother. 'Tell them that God can be found in their own houses.'

'Let each one find his own path,' replied Nanak. 'Why should I worry my head about their methods?'

The beauty of the woodland in spring cast its usual spell. But, for Nanak, the beauty was now tinged with anguish for he needed to know the truth of the reality that did not change with the seasons. A beautiful hymn in Raga Basant sums up the feeling:

> It was springtime. The trees were in new leaf; many wild shrubs were in flower. The woods around Talwandi were a beauteous sight. Young men of his village came to him and said: 'Nanak, it is spring. Come with us and let us behold the wonders of nature.'
>
> 'The month of Chaitra,' said Nanak, 'is the most beautiful of the twelve months of the year because all is green and every living thing seems to blossom into fullness. But my heart does not rejoice at the sight of the blossoming of nature until it is blessed with the name of the Lord. We must first subdue our ego, sing praises of the Lord and then our hearts too will be fragrant.'
>
> 'We do not understand what you say,' they protested: 'We want to tell you that in the woods the trees are so green that we cannot find words to describe them; there are varieties of flowers whose beauty is beyond the speech of man; there

are fruits whose lusciousness is beyond praise; and beneath them the shade is cool and fragrant. You should see these things with your own eyes.'

'The Lord's grace,' said Nanak, 'gave the trees their new foliage. His decrees covered them with blossoms of great beauty and filled their fruits with sweet nectarine. When they have their foliage the Lord makes their shade cool and fragrant. I have such foliage in my own heart with similar flowers, fruit and cool shade, and people seek shelter under it.

'The great God has given us eyes to see, ears to hear and a mouth to speak and eat the corn that grows. Why has he given us these things?

'He has given you eyes not merely to gape at the woods but to behold His creation and marvel at it; ears to hear godly counsel; the tongue to speak the truth. Thereafter, whatever you receive is your true wealth and sustenance.'

The young men did not understand all that Nanak said. They tried once more to persuade him to come out with them. 'Spring comes but once a year and nature dons its garb of green but once. Then comes the fall. Trees lose their foliage and the woods are barren of beauty. If you want to see nature at its best, see it in the month of Chaitra.'

'Months and seasons ever come and go and come again,' replied Nanak. 'Trees and bushes attain foliage at

one season, lose it at another and once again become green when the season turns. The lesson for you is to see that those who do good acts reap the fruit of good action and those who do evil, wither and die; those who take the name of the Lord ever have spring in their hearts. The grape only receives its juice during the monsoon but the good man receives his reward at all times of the year and all times of the day and night. Human birth is the springtime of the cycle of birth, death and rebirth; it is the time for you to plant the seed of good action and reap its fruit in life thereafter; in this do not tarry.'

As Nanak grew even more detached from the ties of living, he took no notice of his wife or children, of his goods, or of the people around him. His life became one of prayer, alms giving, ablution and the seeking after knowledge: *nam, dan, isnan* and *gyan*. Lust, anger and pride fell away as Nanak's heart was filled with truth and blessed contentment. Nanak lived in this state 'like one drunk' for some years till his sister, Nanaki, now married, took the situation in hand. She persuaded her husband, Jai Ram, to invite her brother over to Sultanpur (now in Pakistan), where they lived, and get him employment with his master, Nawab Daulat Khan Lodhi.

Nanak went to Sultanpur accompanied by a family servant, a Muslim named Mardana, who was to become his closest companion. Mardana, the Janamsakhi tells us, came

from the brewer caste, and was a gifted musician. He played the rabab (a string instrument) and also sang hymns.

Nawab Daulat Khan Lodhi was impressed with the integrity of his new storekeeper and accountant. Nanak would not accept bribes from agents and refused to follow the corrupt practices of his predecessors. The people in Sultanpur could not stop praising Nanak.

In Sultanpur, Nanak organized his daily life in an ideal manner. Every evening he and Mardana would sing hymns before retiring to bed. Nanak would wake up while it was still dark, and, after a dip in the river close by, sing hymns with the coterie of his followers. After this, at the appointed hour, Nanak would go to the court of the nawab and apply himself to his work.

Though he won the approbation of his employer and those he dealt with, Nanak was unhappy.

'This has been suddenly put around my neck like a noose,' he said. He began to say to himself that if he had to serve anyone, wouldn't it be wiser to serve his own Master who is within him instead of the person without? 'It is all very well to seek knowledge and wisdom but one cannot escape the noose of maya without sowing seeds of good actions. One cannot earn wages without service and it is the love of the wage which stands in the way of renunciation. Why not then serve the great Master who is the Lord of all?' Nanak postponed his decision with the thought: 'I, Nanak, am no better than others; others are no worse than I; what the Lord wills, Nanak will honour and obey.' (Mehervan's Janamsakhi.)

It was, however, clear that the time of decision was at hand.

Nanak's days were spent in noting down receipts and expenses. At the end of the day, he added up the totals to make sure they tallied with the accounts. He often had to work late into the night adding up his figures under the light of the lamp. One night he got angry with himself and threw away his pen and account books. He asked himself: 'Why have I got involved in these affairs and forgotten my Maker? Am I destined to spend my days and nights writing accounts? It is a vast net in which I find myself caught; if I let the days go by, the noose will close tighter around me. If I have to burn the midnight oil, it should be for something worthwhile.'

Nanak pondered over these issues late into the night and, instead of returning home, went to the stream to bathe. He prayed: 'Lord send me a guru, a guide who will show me the path that leads to Thy mansion.'

That very night God revealed Himself to Nanak. Nanak prayed fervently and begged the Lord to forgive him and remove him from the world that had so ensnared him. The Lord asked Nanak: 'Why are you so agitated? You have done no wrong.'

'I have let my mind turn from Thee,' replied Nanak, 'to the petty trifles of the world.'

'Your errors have I forgiven. The maya that you complain of is also a part of Me. What you see is but its shadow.'

'Lord destroy in me the longing for worldly gain.'

'Nanak you shall no more crave for worldly gain. I am pleased with you. On you be My blessing.' (Mehervan's Janamsakhi.)

The mystic experience that finally made Nanak take up his mission is put at different times and is variously described. The incident took place in August 1507 on the third night before the full moon. According to the Janamsakhi: The moon had set, but it was dark and the stars still twinkled in the sky when Nanak, followed by his servant, went to the river Bein. Nanak took off his kurta and dhoti and stepped into the stream. He closed his nostrils and ducked into the water. He did not come up. The servant waited a while and then, panicking, ran up and down the river bank crying for Nanak. A strange voice rose from the waters saying: 'Do not lose patience.'

Mardana, however, ran back to Sultanpur and sobbed out his story. A great commotion took place in the town because Nanak was loved by all – Hindus and Muslims, the rich and the poor. When Daulat Khan Lodhi heard of the mishap, he was most distressed. 'Friends,' he said, 'Nanak was a man of God. Let us dredge the river and rescue [*sic*] his corpse.'

While the people of Sultanpur were dredging the river, Nanak was conducted into the presence of God. The Almighty gave him a bowl of milk. 'Nanak, drink this bowl,' He commanded. 'It is not milk as it may seem;

this is nectar (*amrit*). It will give thee power of prayer, love of worship, truth and contentment.'

Nanak drank the nectar and was overcome. He made another obeisance. The Almighty then blessed him:

> I release thee from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth; he that sets his eyes on you with faith will be saved; he that hears your words with conviction will be helped by Me; he that you forgive will be forgiven by Me. I grant thee salvation. Nanak go back to the evil world and teach men and women to pray (*nam*), to give in charity (*dan*) and to live cleanly (*isnan*). Do good to the world and redeem it in the age of sin (Kalyuga).
>
> (Mehervan's Janamsakhi)

At dawn, three days later, on the full moon in August, Nanak re-emerged from the Bein. He was now a changed and determined man. While the people clamoured around him acclaiming him as a new messiah, he paid no heed. 'What have I to do with men like these!' he said to himself. He gave away all he had to the poor. He even cast off his clothes, keeping for himself only a loincloth. He left his home and joined a band of hermits.

Soon people began expressing themselves loudly: 'Nanak was a sensible man,' some said, but now he has

lost his head.' 'He is stricken with the fear of the Lord,' said others, 'and is no longer himself.' 'Something in the river has bitten him,' the rest were convinced, and took to calling him 'mad, bewitched'.

'It is the Lord who has possessed me and made me mad,' explained Nanak. 'If I find merit in the eyes of my Lord, then will I have justified my waywardness.'

'Nanak, you are a different person today from what you were,' the people exclaimed. 'Tell us the path you intend to take. We only know of two ways: one of the Hindus and the other of the Mussalmans.'

'There is no Hindu, there is no Mussalman', replied Nanak.

'You talk in cryptic language,' they said. 'In this world we understand the two ways: of Hinduism and of Islam.'

'There are no Mussalmans, there are no Hindus,' repeated Nanak. (Mehervan's Janamsakhi.)

Nanak spent another two years in and around Sultanpur before he forsook the habitations of men and took to the forest and solitude. The faithful Mardana was his sole companion. He wore a strange dress: a long cloak worn by Muslim mendicants. He also wore a cloth cap (*seli topee*). He carried a beggar's bowl, a staff and a prayer mat. When asked why he wore this outlandish garb, Nanak replied: 'I am dressed like a clown for the amusement of my Master. If my apparel pleases Him, I will be happy.'

Nanak's first journey took him eastwards to Hindu centres of pilgrimage. His biographies have fabricated many incidents based on Nanak's hymns, many of which depict the Guru's love for nature.

One day, says Mehervan's Janamsakhi, Nanak and Mardana, while travelling, espied a flock of swans flying overhead. Nanak was bewitched and began to run after them with his eyes fixed on the birds. Mardana followed him. The flock descended in a field and let Nanak approach them without showing any sign of fear – for Nanak was a man of God, who harmed no one. Nanak admired the birds; their long slender necks, their luminous dark eyes and their silver-white plumage. He wondered whether these birds – which spanned the heavens – had ever cast their eyes on their Maker. Why, he asked himself, should such beautiful birds wander restlessly across the continents – from Khorasan in Central Asia to Hindustan and back again to Khorasan? He blessed the swans and bade them Godspeed on their journey.

Another hymn illustrates the political and social conditions of the time through picturing an incident that occurred in the suburbs of the capital city, Delhi. The city was at the time ruled by a bloodthirsty Pathan king (Ibrahim Lodhi). Nanak's fame had preceded him and large crowds of citizens, sightseers and seekers after truth, Muslims as well as Hindus, came to see him. Near Nanak's camp was a place where beggars and mendicants were fed free of charge by the wicked king. The people told

Nanak of their king's evil ways and how he expiated his sins by feeding beggars.

Nanak spoke to them:

> Listen ye children of God! This charity of the king is of no consequence; it is the act of a blind man stumbling in the dark. He is worse than a blind man because even if his eyes lose their light, a blind man can hear and speak and comprehend, but one who has lost his mind has lost all. What avail is the giving of alms to one who sins by day and gives in charity at night? A stone dam can hold the flood but if the dam bursts you cannot repair the breach by plastering mud. Evil is like the flood, the stone dam like faith. If faith weakens, the dam will give way and the flood will sweep all before it. Its force is then so great that no boat or boatman dare embark on it to save its victims. Then nothing abides save the Name of the Lord.

(Mehervan's Janamsakhi)

We do not know how long Nanak stayed in Delhi. He then proceeded to Hardiwar on the banks of the Ganga. It was apparently at a time of some religious festival when large crowds had turned up to bathe in the 'holy' river. Mardana was very impressed with the sight and said to Nanak: 'What a lot of good people there are in the world!

They must be genuinely desirous of improving themselves that is why they come on a pilgrimage.'

Nanak was not so impressed by the sight of the people 'washing away their sins' by the ritual of bathing. 'Only a bullion dealer can tell the difference between the genuine and the counterfeit,' he replied, 'and at this place there is no bullion dealer.'

Nanak and Mardana stayed at Hardiwar for some time in order to be present at the Baisakhi (12/13 April) fair. It was on this occasion that an incident, which made Nanak famous, took place.

There was a large crowd bathing in the river. Nanak saw them face eastwards and throw palmfuls of water to the sun. Nanak entered the stream and started throwing water westwards.

'In the name of Rama!' exclaimed the shocked pilgrims, 'who is this man who throws water to the west? He is either mad or a Mussalman.' They approached Nanak and asked him why he offered water in the wrong direction. Nanak asked them why they threw it eastwards to the sun.

'We offer it to our dead ancestors,' they replied.

'Where are your dead ancestors?'

'With the gods in heaven.'

'How far is the abode of the gods?'

'Forty-nine crore *kos* [approximately two-and-a-half miles equal one *kos*] from here.'

'Does the water get that far?'

'Without doubt! But why do you throw it westwards?'

Nanak replied: 'My home and lands are near Lahore. It has rained everywhere except on my land. I am therefore watering my fields.'

'Man of God, how can you water your fields near Lahore from this place?'

'If you can send it 49 crore *kos* to the abode of the gods, why can't I send it to Lahore, which is only a couple of hundred *kos* away?'

The people were abashed at this reply. 'He is not mad,' they said, 'he is surely a great seer.' (Mehervan's Janamsakhi.)

A large number of Hindu pilgrims who had foregathered at Hardwar became disciples of the Guru. He stayed on there after the Baisakhi festival preaching to the people:

> The most precious gift of God is human birth because it is by reason and responsible action as human beings that we can get out of the vicious circle of life, death and rebirth and attain salvation. One must abolish duality in order to be a complete devotee.
>
> 'And how does one overcome duality?' they asked.
>
> [Nanak replied:] 'By faith in the One; by hearing and speaking of the One; by never abandoning belief in Him. By austerity, truth, restraint in his heart.'

(Mehervan's Janamsakhi)

From Haridwar, Nanak and Mardana proceeded to Prayag (modern-day Allahabad) where the rivers Jamuna and the mythical Saraswati join the Ganga. From Prayag, the Guru went to Banaras (or Varanasi), the centre of Hindu learning and orthodoxy. The Adi Granth describes the many encounters Guru Nanak had with pandits who chided him for his unorthodoxy and probed his knowledge of the sacred texts. Nanak declared:

> It matters not how many cart loads of learning you have nor what learned company you keep; it matters not how many boat loads of books you carry nor the tree of knowledge; it matters not how many years or months you spend in study nor with what passion and single-mindedness you pursue knowledge. Only one thing really matters, the rest is but a whirlwind of the ego.
>
> 'And what is the one thing that matters?' they asked.
>
> Nanak replied: 'There are a hundred falsehoods, but only one sovereign truth – that unless truth enters the soul all service and study [are] false.'

Nanak was equally forthright about the pandits' fetish regarding the purity of their cooking vessels and kitchens. He decided to draw their attention to this in his usual manner of highlighting the incongruous aspects. He went with them and saw with what care they bathed, scrubbed

their utensils, swept the ground near the hearth, washed the vegetables and cooked the food. When one plate was laid before Nanak, he refused to eat from it, saying: 'I am not satisfied with the purity of the food you offer me. It is prepared by one who is full of sin and sins cannot be cleansed by washing the body.'

The pandits did not fully comprehend the import of Nanak's words and prepared the meal afresh. This time they dug up the earth and replastered it; they even washed the logs of wood before kindling them. Again Nanak refused to partake of the meal and continued his sermon: 'You err in believing that purity can be gained by scrubbing and washing. That does not apply even to inanimate things like wood, dung-fuel or water, much less to a human being. Man is unclean when his heart is tainted with greed, his tongue coated with falsehood, his eyes envious of the beauty of another's wife or his wealth, his ears dirty with slander. All these can only be cleansed by knowledge. Basically all men are good but often they pursue a predetermined path to hell.'

Nanak was questioned on his attitude towards the sacred texts of the Hindus: 'The Vedas say one thing and you another. People who read the Vedas do not follow their teachings and now you confuse them more than ever. Why don't you either combine your teaching with that of the Vedas or separate them more distinctly?'

Nanak replied: 'The Vedas tell you of the difference between good and evil. Sin is the seed of hell; chastity the seed of paradise. Knowledge and the teaching of the

Vedas complement each other; they are to one another as merchandise to the merchant.'

It would appear that by this time Nanak had decided that his faith was to be an eclectic one for he sang hymns of Namdev, Kabir, Ravi Das, Sain and Beni. His new disciples tried to persuade Nanak to settle down in Banaras. Nanak refused to do so: 'I pursue the one and only path of devotion to God,' he replied. 'Your learning and religion do not appeal to me and I have no interest in trade other than the name of God for God Himself has extinguished the desire for acquisition in me.'

Piecing together evidence from other sources, we find that the first journey apparently took the Guru as far east as West Bengal and Assam. On his way back to the Punjab, he spent some days at Jagannath Puri (in Orissa). He travelled round the Punjab and visited the Sufi headquarters at Pak Pattan (now in Pakistan) before he set out on his second long journey – this time southwards. He is said to have travelled through Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Konkan and Rajasthan, though there is little evidence to show that he did so.

Nanak sojourned in the Himalayas for some time before he set out on his last and longest journey. This was westwards as far as Baghdad and to the Muslims' holy cities of Mecca and Medina. It was on this journey that another incident took place. He was staying in a

mosque and fell asleep with his feet towards the Kaaba – an act considered to be of grave disrespect to the house of God. When the mullah came to say his prayers, he shook Nanak rudely and said: 'O servant of God, thou hast thy feet towards Kaaba, the house of God; why hast thou done such a thing?'

Nanak replied: 'Then turn my feet towards some direction where there is no God.'

By the time Nanak returned home around 1526, the Mughal Emperor Zahir-ud-din Babar had invaded the Punjab. The Guru was at Saidpur when the town was sacked by the invaders. Nanak makes many references to the havoc caused by this invasion.

Nanak was by this time too old to undertake any more strenuous journeys. He settled in the village Kartarpur where he spent the last years of his life preaching to the people. His disciples came to be known as Sikhs (from the Sanskrit *shishya* or Pali *sikkha*). He built a dharamshala (abode of faith) whose inmates followed a strict code of discipline: rising well before dawn, bathing and then foregathering in the dharamshala for prayer and hymn singing. They went about their daily chores and met again for the evening service. At the dharamshala was the Guru *ka langar* (the Guru's kitchen) where all who came were obliged to break bread without distinction of caste or religion.

Among Nanak's disciples was a man called Lehna whom Nanak chose in preference to his two sons as his successor. Said Nanak to Lehna: 'Thou art Angad, a part of my body.' He then asked another disciple to daub Angad's forehead with saffron and proclaimed him the second Guru.

Nanak died in the early hours of 22 September 1539. He was a poet and lover of nature to the last. As he lay on his deathbed he recalled the scenes of his childhood. 'The tamarisk must be in flower now; the pampas grass must be waving its woolly head in the breeze; the cicadas must be calling in the lonely glades,' he said before he closed his eyes in eternal sleep.

Mehervan's Janamsakhi records the manner in which his body was laid to rest. Said the Mussalmans: 'We will bury him.' Said the Hindus: 'We will cremate him.' Nanak said: 'You place flowers on either side, Hindus on my right, Muslims on my left. Those whose flowers remain fresh tomorrow will have their way.' He asked them to pray. When the prayer was over, Nanak pulled the sheet over him and went to eternal sleep. Next morning when they raised the sheet they found nothing. The flowers of both communities were fresh. The Hindus took theirs; the Muslims took those that they had placed.

It is little wonder that Nanak came to be revered as the king or shah of the holy men – the guru of the Hindus and the *peer* of the Mussalmans:

Baba Nanak Shah Fakeer
Hindu ka Guru, Mussalman ka Peer

Guru Gobind Singh

In the summer of 1922, a strange phenomenon was witnessed in the Punjab. That year the Sikhs launched a passive resistance movement to take possession of one of their historic shrines called Guru Ka Bagh, about 20 km from Amritsar. Batches of passive resisters went to this shrine. They were mercilessly beaten by the police. Their arms and legs were smashed; they were dragged by their long hair; and many were hung upside down from branches of trees till they became senseless.

Instead of being cowed down by these brutalities, the number of passive resisters increased steadily till 500-strong *jathas* (groups) began to arrive every day at Guru Ka Bagh – amongst them many who had suffered beatings earlier and had been discharged from the hospital after treatment.

This 'rare species of courage', as Mahatma Gandhi and Reverend C. F. Andrews (an Englishman who supported the struggle for freedom by India) described it, 'was born of religious fervour', which, in turn, was born of a legend widely accepted by the Sikhs. It was said that wherever five passive resisters (called satyagrahis) assembled to say their prayers, Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth and last Sikh Guru) appeared before them. It was believed that he led them to Guru Ka Bagh. And he, not

the passive resister, received the blows showered by the police. When these satyagrahis were produced in court and asked their names and addresses, they gave their names correctly. But of their parentage and addresses, the answer invariably was: 'My father's name is Guru Gobind Singh; my mother's Mata Sahib Devan. My home is the Guru's own Anandpur Sahib [a holy place for the Sikhs].'

The Guru Ka Bagh satyagraha went on for some months till the Punjab gaols were crammed. Ultimately, it was the police and the government that gave in and agreed to Guru Ka Bagh being handed over to the Sikhs. I have met many of these passive resisters and, with my own ears, heard them tell of the darshan of the Guru, and his ethereal form leading them to face the police. They swear that they lost all fear and when they were tortured they felt no pain.

Soon after Guru Ka Bagh, yet another phenomenon was witnessed in the Punjab. The sacred pool surrounding the Hari Mandir Sahib (the Golden Temple) in Amritsar was drained and desilted. In this *kar seva* (doing service), as it was known, millions of people took part. One met hundreds of men and women who swore that many a time while they were engaged in this *kar seva*, Guru Gobind Singh's white hawk swooped down from the skies and settled on the gold pinnacle of the Hari

Mandir Sahib – and then as dramatically vanished into the blue heaven.

Sceptics will undoubtedly have explanations for these phenomena. Let us concede that in an atmosphere of religious fervour, such experiences are possible. However, the point to bear in mind is that for the Sikhs these phenomena have been usually connected with Guru Gobind Singh, because he has been to them their father-figure, their supreme hero, the sustainer of faith, hope and courage, and their beau idéal – all in one.

What kind of man was Guru Gobind Singh (1666–1708)? Most readers, I think, must be familiar with the main events of his life. I will not repeat them. I will only draw attention to five points to help one judge the Guru's place in history. The choice of the number 'five' is deliberate. Five has some kind of mystic significance in the Punjab – the land of five rivers. The Guru himself subscribed to the sanctity of five:

> *Pancon men nit bartat main hun*
> *panc milan to piran pir.*
> (Wherever there are five there am I.
> Where five meet, they are the holiest of the holy.)

First, it should be borne in mind that he was only a child of nine when his father, the ninth Guru, Tegh

Bahadur, was executed (beheaded) by the order of the sixth Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. In any mortal, such an experience would result in a traumatic shock followed, first, by fear and, then, by hate and a desire for revenge against the people who had perpetrated the crime. I have little doubt that many persons must have tried to fill young Gobind's mind with feelings of hatred and revenge against the Mughals. The Guru, however, remained impervious to these influences. When he grew into manhood, he announced his mission in life in the following words:

> I came into the world charged with the duty to uphold the right in every place, to destroy sin and evil ... the only reason I took birth was to see that righteousness may flourish, that good may live, and tyrants be torn out by their roots.

Secondly, we should constantly bear in mind that the Guru never subscribed to the theory of 'might is right'. Although he introduced the worship of arms in Sikh religious rituals and even described the sword, the spear and the musket as 'the *peers*', religious mentors of the Sikhs, this was entirely in the context of using force as the 'righter of wrongs'. He was fully aware of the fact that the teachings of the first five Gurus and the Granth Sahib were pacific in content. But should truth and goodness be allowed to suffer annihilation at the hands of falsehood and evil? Guru Gobind Singh's answer was

a categorical 'no'. In a Persian composition entitled the Zafarnama, the epistle of victory, said to have been sent to Emperor Aurangzeb, he wrote:

Chu kar uz hama har heel te dar guzusht
Halal ust burdan ba shamsheer dust.
(When all other means have failed,
it is righteous to draw the sword.)

In this context, it is significant that although Guru Gobind Singh dictated the final version of the Guru Granth Sahib, he did not include any of his own compositions exhorting people to rise in arms in the sacred text.

Thirdly, the Guru took special care that anti-Muslim sentiment should not stain the crusade he was about to launch against the Mughals. 'My sword strikes tyrants, not men', he said. Amongst the earliest recruits to his army were Muslims. Although he fought the Mughals all his life – as indeed he did the Hindu Rajputs of the hills – he had both Muslims and Hindus fighting on his side, shoulder to shoulder with his Sikhs. This followed naturally from his conviction that all men were of one caste: '*Manas ki jat sab ek pacanbo*,' he exhorted. He believed that the mosque and the temple were the same; the call of the muezzin and the chanting of the pandit were the same.

The non-communal tradition started by Guru Gobind Singh was continued into the time of Maharajah

Ranjit Singh (1780–1839) who was, as pointed out by Jawaharlal Nehru in his *Discovery of India*, one of the few genuinely secular rulers of our country. It was, therefore, in the fitness of things that in the crowning success of Sikh arms, the flag that the Muslim warrior, Colonel Sheikh Bassawan, triumphantly carried through the streets of Kabul in 1839 bore the emblem of Guru Gobind Singh. Likewise, the Dogra general, Zorawar Singh, planted this saffron banner bearing Guru Gobind Singh's chakra, with kirpans crossed beneath, in the heart of Tibet.

Guru Gobind Singh was able to raise his fight against the Mughals into a struggle of the downtrodden against the oppression of the rich and into a demand for justice against the tyranny of wrongdoers: in short, into a crusade, a veritable *dharma yudha* (a war to protect righteousness) against the powers of evil. He forbade his soldiers from looting. He made them take solemn vows that they would never molest the women of the enemy. He emulated the example of our ancient rishis and yogis and insisted that all Sikhs should wear their hair and beards unshorn – for they were not common soldiers but Sant Sipahis, soldier-saints.

Fourthly, what deserves attention is the incredible sense of loyalty and sacrifice that the Guru was able to arouse amongst his followers. Let me give you a few examples. You may have heard of the famous baptismal ceremony when five men willingly agreed to have their heads cut off. There are innumerable examples of similar

sacrifice. As well known as these first five Sikhs, known as the 'Panj Piyaras', were, there was another group of known as '*chali mukte*' (40 liberated ones). Under great stress during the prolonged siege of Anandpur beginning in May 1705, these 40 individuals asked the Guru to let them go. After getting a deed of renunciation, the Guru released them from their obligation. When they returned to their homes, their women folk taunted them for disloyalty to the master. The 40 (including amongst them a woman, Mai Bhago) rejoined the Guru at Muktsar and fell fighting in December 1705. The last request their leader, Mahan Singh, made to the Guru, was to have the deed of renunciation torn up before he closed his eyes for ever.

Yet another example is that of an old woman who came to the Guru for help. She told him that her husband and two sons had been killed fighting. All that remained of her family was her youngest son who was dangerously ill. She begged the Guru's blessings to restore him to health – not to have someone to look after her in old age, but in order that this son too could attain martyrdom in the battlefield.

How was Guru Gobind Singh able to instil in his followers this kind of inspired valour? He could do so primarily by setting an example himself. He fought alongside his men. He never put his family before his followers. On the contrary, at one of the engagements, he allowed two of his sons to go to a certain death before he allowed any of his 'Panj Piyaras' to do so. Within a

few months he lost all his four sons: two were killed fighting; the other two, aged nine and seven, were executed by Wazir Khan, the governor of Sirhind (in Punjab), in December 1705. The Guru's own mother died of grief. When his wife asked him, in tears, for her four sons, the Guru answered: 'What if four be dead; thousands live to continue the battle.' It was by this kind of personal example that the Guru was able to train poor rustics, who had handled nothing more lethal than a lathi, and flabby, pot-bellied, timid shopkeepers, to become some of the greatest fighters India has ever known. He redeemed his pledges that '*he would train the sparrow to fight the hawk*' and '*teach one man to fight a legion*'.

Pathans, Persians, Afghans and Baluchis of the North West Frontier region, who had for centuries invaded India, and terrified, massacred and looted our people, were beaten back into their homelands by these new soldiers of Guru Gobind Singh. It has never been fully appreciated by our historians that these Sikhs set up a human barricade against the invaders and so made possible the rise of Maratha power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when they (the Marathas) ruled over vast territories in the Indian subcontinent.

Fifthly, and the final point, is the genuinely democratic spirit of this great leader of men. Guru Gobind Singh never claimed divinity for himself. He denounced those who tried to make him an incarnation of God: 'I was ordained to establish a sect and lay down its rules,' he wrote. 'But whosoever regards me as Lord

shall be damned and destroyed. I am, and [about] this let there be no doubt, I am but a slave to God, as other men are: a beholder of the wonders of creation.'

He took no credit for what he did. He attributed all achievements to the Khalsa (the pure) – all his victories, his power, his prestige, he said, were due to the efforts of his followers. Although he was their Guru, he made himself their disciple: *aape gur-chela*. Whenever the congregation passed a resolution, it acquired the sanctity of a *gurumata* – an ordinance of the Guru binding even on the Guru himself.

Guru Gobind Singh was thus a rare combination of many qualities: a sophisticated aesthete composing poetry in many languages such as Sanskrit, Prakrit, Persian and Punjabi; a handsome cavalier fond of courting danger; a soldier who dedicated his life to fighting tyranny; a leader who looked upon his followers as comrades and equals; a Guru who exhorted people to worship the God they loved best but insisted they look upon their fellow beings as equals; and a man who sacrificed all he had – his family and his worldly possessions and ultimately himself for his ideals. This ideal he stated in lines that have become the most quoted of his compositions:

> O Lord of Thee these boons I ask:
> Let me never shun a righteous task.
> Let me be fearless when I go to battle.
> Give me faith that victory will be mine.

Give me power to sing Thy praise,
And when comes the time to end my life,
Let me fall in mighty strife.

Has the world produced many men as great as Guru Gobind Singh?

Chapter Nine

Religion versus Morality

... the role of religion in present-day Indian society has shrunk to minimal proportions. Instead of bringing the best out of human beings, religion now brings out the worst in us by providing facile means of forgiveness through performance of pilgrimage or some trite form of penance or the intercession of godmen. We have to either give a totally modern reorientation to religion or scrap it altogether.

There is a trading community of north-western India and the adjoining areas of Pakistan that is renowned for its scrupulous observance of religious rituals as it is for its unscrupulous methods of business. To this community are ascribed the following lines in Potthohaaree (or Pothwari) dialect, spoken in and around the districts of Rawalpindi and Campbellpur:

Koor vee aseen mareney aan,
Ghat vee aseen toleyney aan,
Par sacchey patshah
Aseen naan vee teyra lainey aan
(Lies we often tell,
Short we do often measure,
But true Lord,
Your name we also take.)

These lines pithily sum up the divorce between the practice of religion and the precepts of morality that bedevils the Indian society today. It would be instructive to know why and when this divorce took place and whether there is any possibility of bringing the two together again. In order to do so we need to examine the origins of religion and its subsequent development.

First, the genesis of religion lies in the fear of the unknown. While fear continues to be the main reason for the hold of religion over the ignorant masses, the desire to know the truth about the unknown remains the chief preoccupation of religious philosophers, who want to know how life began, its purpose and the possibility of its continuance after death. All this came to be summed up in the concept of God as the trinity of the creator, preserver and destroyer. It was at a later stage of civilization that religion extended its sphere of activity to include making laws for society. This came about when it was discovered that the fear of the unknown God was a more effective means of preventing men from hurting each other, from stealing each others properties, slaves or wives than the scaffold or the lash.

Secondly, having established a precedent, religion further extended its sphere by making rules of social intercourse. For example: who could marry and who could not; the number of wives a man could have; and even prescribing rules of diet and hygiene as if they were divinely ordained. In this period of development came the laws of Solomon, Moses's Ten Commandments, the Code of Man, the concept of halal (just) and haram (unlawful/forbidden) enunciated in the Holy Quran and the tradition of the Prophet (Hadith). Later religions like Sikhism likewise evolved their own sets of dos and don'ts, which were spelt out in their Rahatnamas. So, a whole lot of traditions were built up by different religious groups: Catholics could not eat meat on Fridays; Hindus were

forbidden from eating beef; Jains could not consume flesh of any kind or any vegetable grown under the earth; Jews and Muslims could eat no pork; Sikhs could not eat non-*jhatka* meat or take tobacco in any form. None of these rules could be regarded strictly as within the purview of religion, but since religion provided self-imposed restrictions, in due course, they assumed dominant roles in their respective religious groups.

The third development vis-à-vis religion was introspective: a looking within oneself to examine one's own behaviour to make a personal balance sheet of one's own conduct. Had one been unfair in dealing with others or succumbed to some temptation? This usually took the form of meditation, prayer, telling the beads of the rosary and other similar practices designed to make one better as well as restore peace of mind.

When a new religious system came into existence, the three functions were performed by the founder. After his death they required the services of three different people: the speculative by the philosopher; law enforcement by the priest – qadi or mullah; and the introspective by the guide – guru or *peer*. As society advanced from the medieval to modern times, the state gradually deprived these functionaries of their religious duties. The role of religion in human conduct began to be diminished. At the same time, since religious theories

about the origin of the universe and after-life failed to convince an increasingly sceptical generation and scientists admitted their limitations in probing these mysteries, soothsayers, armed with their paraphernalia, including sky charts, palm impressions, playing cards and even tea leaves and coffee cups (which they claimed helped them look into the past and future), came into their own; the astrologer took over from the astronomer and the palmist from the futurologist. These charlatans gained widespread acceptance by passing themselves off as men and women of religion. As in the world of commerce, so in the world of religion, bad currency drove out the good.

Depriving religion of its law-making and law-enforcing functions was carried out with greater thoroughness and with more serious consequences with the passage of time. The state became the law maker, the law administrator and the final arbiter. Civil and criminal codes replaced religious codes leaving out of their purview pointless prescriptions about diet, ritual and external forms, which became the principal preoccupations of organized religions. Thus, religious censorship in the form of ostracism came to be confined to trivia: If you ate flesh, garlic, onions and so on, you would be regarded by Jainis as a non-Jain, if you ate beef, you could become a Hindu outcaste; eating pork (by the Jews or Muslims) brought on your head the wrath of the rabbi and the mullah; and clipping hair and smoking (by a Sikh) could lead to denunciation by the Khalsa Panth. But when it

came to aspects that mattered like murder, rape, arson, robbery, stealing or seducing another's wife, it was no longer the fear or religious censure that was the ultimate deterrent but the hangman's rope, solitary confinement in a prison cell and a policeman's baton. This was a great pity because the self-restraint that religion had inculcated was gone, and when administration of law and order fell into desuetude (as in India in recent years) criminal instincts, which religious persuasion had kept under control, began to resurface.

People committed crimes because their consciences were undisturbed; they learnt to square their lying and cheating by paying lip service to God, by displaying external symbolism and performing rituals. Moral values went completely haywire. Lying, which was condemned as a sin by religion but not punished by secular law (unless on oath in court), became common. Deviations from what were regarded as normal pattern of behaviour in matters of sex assumed exaggerated importance. While in the advanced societies of the West, adultery and homosexuality came to be regarded as people's private business, with us Indians they became matters of public censure. A 'godless' West liberated itself of sexual inhibitions but learnt to be more truthful; a 'religious' India learnt to forgive liars and cheaters but condemned lechers and sodomists. The cleanest bill of moral health

that could be paid to an Indian by Indians was his being *naadey da succha* – having the purity of the pyjama cord. Paradoxically, with the loosening of the hold of religion, we also lost our respect for women as mothers, sisters and daughters and incidents of 'eve teasing' and rape increased.

There remains another aspect of religion: an individual's personal equation with himself or herself. If he or she was unhappy or if his or her mind was disturbed, he or she sought guidance from his or her guru and, according to the latter's instructions, chanted appropriate mantras, did yoga asanas and meditation to bring peace to his or her tortured mind. In the West, these functions came to be largely performed by the psychiatrists, although some godmen and godwomen flourished.

It will be evident from the foregoing discussion that the role of religion in present-day Indian society has shrunk to minimal proportions. Instead of bringing the best out of human beings, religion now brings out the worst in us by providing facile means of forgiveness through performance of pilgrimage or some trite form of penance or the intercession of godmen. We have to either give a totally modern reorientation to religion or scrap it altogether.

A country as vast and as populous as India, and with such a high proportion of illiterate and deprived people,

can never abolish religion; nor can it afford religion being perverted. There is enough tolerance of spirit among Indians of all religions to accept each other's concept of God and allow each other to individually pursue the quest for peace of mind. What has faded into the background and needs to be restored to its legitimate primacy is religion as a social phenomenon setting out rules how people should conduct themselves towards their fellow human beings. This I suggest can be done by re-elevating Truth in all its dimensions to the status of God: as an abstract concept as another word for God; as the principle of behaviour towards one's fellow beings; and as the touchstone of one's conscience. It is only when this many-splendoured Truth becomes the object of our worship, our code of conduct and the healing balm for our souls, that religion and morality will become reunited as two sides of the same golden coin.

Chapter Ten

God Is Not for Sale

Priests and raagis have acquired vested interests in religious practice. Until and unless they are divested of their stranglehold on places of worship, there is little chance of worship and there is little chance of their being restored as havens of spirituality.

There was a time when I used to look forward to Thursday afternoons and to spending a couple of hours at the mausoleum of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (1238–1325) in New Delhi. Although beggars lined the long corridors leading to the graves of the Peer Sahib and the renowned musician, scholar and poet, Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), once you got past them you were left in peace to enjoy the qawwalis sung in the courtyard.

Soon, the *mujawwars* (caretakers) of the shrine got to know of me. Every time I went there, someone or the other approached me with a receipt book and a ballpoint pen in hand. Would I make a donation for the *langar* (free kitchen) and upkeep of the place? After a while, I stopped going to Nizamuddin.

There was a time when I used to look forward to going to Hardiwar for Purnima (full moon). The worship of the river Ganga at sunset at Har Ki Pauri with lit candelabras and leaf boats with flickering oil lamps floating down the river presented a truly magical sight. Seeing the Ganga in moonlight was a mystic experience.

I was younger and could brush aside persistent beggars, *pandas* (priests who keep genealogical records), *purohits* (priests) and the innumerable agents of innumerable so-called charitable organizations who surrounded me with the standard receipt books and ballpoint pens soliciting contributions for *gowshalas* (cow

sheds), ashrams and other institutions. I stopped going to Hardiwar.

It was the same at Varanasi. The one and the only time I went to Puri (in Orissa) to see the Jagannath temple, I was unable to step out of the car because hordes of *pandas* were clamouring for my attention and claiming to be my family *purohits*.

I have never been much of a gurudwara-goer. But on the rare occasions I visited gurudwaras, I never placed any money in front of the Granth Sahib or in the *golak* (donation box). I have enough evidence of money being misappropriated by members of caretaker committees, *granthis* and *sewadars* (volunteers who offer their services to the gurudwaras). Whatever *daswandh* (one-tenth) of my earnings I wished to give for charity, I gave to Bhagat Puran Singh (a well-known philanthropist), Mother Teresa or directly to people engaged in good works.

Although there are as yet no beggars or contribution/subscription seekers around gurudwaras, the commercialization that has taken place in Sikh ritual is as bad as among Hindus. There are gradations of *akhand* (non-stop) and *saptah* (one week) *paaths*, depending on how much you are willing to pay for them: novice *granthis* are cheaper to hire than old hands with clearer enunciation. The rates *raagis* charge vary enormously, ranging from hundreds to thousands of rupees. Some of them have their rates printed on their visiting cards. I recall one *jatha* (group) of *raagis* from Delhi asking for an additional amount if you wanted them to bring their brand new Japanese harmonium.

The commercialization of religious rituals was well exposed, in all its crass vulgarity, decades ago, by the trouble that brewed in the temples of Badrinath and Kedarnath (high in the Himalayas in Uttarakhand). These temples are manned by Namboodri Brahmins from Kerala. None but they could enter the sanctum sanctorum or touch the deities enshrined within.

Apart from drawing regular monthly salaries, they had established a claim to seven-and-a-half per cent of the offering made at the temples. Besides the Namboodris holding the rank of high priests (*rawals*), there are pandits and Vedpathaks (those familiar with the Vedas) with different functions allotted to them. Rituals are rated like menus of an expensive restaurant. The entire priestly fraternity of Badrinath and Kedarnath were up in arms because the commissions of its members from the offerings were sought to be reduced; they threatened to stop performing rituals, bathe the deities or offer prayers on behalf of pilgrims.

And the less said about the high-profile ashrams which have mushroomed across the length and breadth of the country, under the patronage of jet-setting babas, gurus, and matajis, the better. Look at the cash, solid gold and silver amounting to crores and crores recovered from the ashram of Satya Sai Baba at Putaparthi in Andhra Pradesh! Who could have imagined the 24-year-old Karmapa with crores in cash and that too in various foreign currencies of the world stacked away in his temple-residence in Sidhbari in Dharamsala (Himachal

Pradesh)? Look at the huge empires created by the likes of the yoga guru Ramdev and some others, who have fallen afoul of the law. For instance, the spiritual guru, Asaram Bapu, with his headquarters at Ahmedabad in Gujarat and with many ashrams under his wing, had been accused of several crimes, including murder, land encroachment and tax evasion. However, the charges could not be proved. Another guru (with a huge following), accused of murder and also sexual misconduct, was Gurmeet Rahim, who heads an organization known as Dera Sacha Sauda, based in Sirsa, Haryana. Yet another guru, Swami Nithyananda (with his base at Bangalore) was involved in a sex scandal and caught on camera. He has claimed that the images in the video – telecast by a South Indian news channel and also available on the Internet – have been morphed. It seems that now our so-called religious and spiritual gurus too are in direct competition with our corrupt political netas.

Priests, *raagis* and other similar figures have acquired vested interests in religious practice. Until and unless they are divested of their stranglehold on places of worship, there is little chance of worship and there is little chance of their being restored as havens of spirituality. It is time somebody called the bluff of these money-grabbing parasites and made the houses of God fit places for deities and their worshippers.

Chapter Eleven

The Need for a Ban on Religious Processions

... none of us has any right to impose our religious presence on people of other faiths. That is exactly what religious processions do and that is why I think it is time we curbed our desire to organize them.

I have not found a single line in any scripture of any faith or in the pronouncements of prophets of different religions exhorting followers to proclaim their faith by taking out processions: in short religions processions have no religious sanction. They are an entirely man-manufactured tradition designed to disrupt civic life and annoy people who belong to other faiths. They succeed in doing both.

Processions and parades take place in all countries. But they are largely of a secular character. In the many years I lived in foreign countries I hardly came across a single religious procession. The few I read about were like those in India, taken out to provoke hostility and like those in Ireland of protestant Orangemen through streets inhabited by Catholics. They invariably succeeded in achieving their sinister object. Christians and Muslims do not take out many processions. One occasionally hears of statues of Virgin Mary or some saint being paraded through the streets. But not very frequently. Sunni Muslims have no tradition of procession taking. Shias do so once a year at Muharram. Processions are a disease largely confined to Hindus, Sikhs and Jains.

We should appeal to leaders of these communities to do some rethinking on the subject. Some Hindu festivals are procession-based. Immersion of idols of Kali and Ganapati require them to be taken out from places where they are installed. The *rath yatra* (literally chariot journey) at Jagannath Puri in Orissa is entirely processional. So

are some Hindu festivals in South India. Exceptions could be made in these cases.

I know there is no religious sanction for processions in Sikhism. Indeed, right through the 40-year rule of Maharajah Ranjit Singh, there is not one reference in his daily diaries to processions on the birthdays of the Gurus or on the anniversaries of their martyrdom. Though a devout Sikh, the maharajah took part in only two processions in the year: One on Basant Panchami, when he led his Amazonian bodyguard to pay homage at the tomb of Madho Lal Hussain (a Sufi saint), and the other during Dussehra. Mammoth processions led by elephants, horsemen and bands, which have become de rigueur of Sikh religious expression, began during British rule and continue with increasing fervour.

I have nothing against religious gatherings. By all means have your Ram Leelas – but in grounds meant for them. Have your dewans and keertans in open spaces when the congregations are too large to be contained in gurduwaras. But none of us has any right to impose our religious presence on people of other faiths. That is exactly what religious processions do and that is why I think it is time we curbed our desire to organize them. This has to be done by leaders of different religious communities and not left to the government because any governmental action in this matter is bound to be misunderstood and resented. If you agree with me, write to the president of the temple or gurudwara committee. If you don't, write to me giving reasons for disagreeing with me.

Chapter Twelve

The Quest

All I want to ask seekers is: Is it worth spending so much time and effort to get a vison of the truth when the only guarantee of success is God's whim?

I always wonder as to what are people who spend many hours in prayer or meditation looking for? When questioned, they usually reply that they are seeking peace of mind or looking for the truth within themselves. I can understand that those with disturbed minds (the vast majority of humans) should want to obtain inner peace. However, when it comes to the Truth, I am all at sea. By truth with a capital 'T', they presumably mean reality, the mystery of the life of God. Whether or not they succeed in their search I do not know because I have yet to meet anyone who claims that he or she has. They only follow others who they believe have achieved the ultimate.

Striving towards the attainment of divine knowledge is common to most religious systems. In Hinduism, it is the rousing of the 'kundalini' (latent energy) from its spinal base and making it travel upwards in stages to the cranium. Sikhism has similar levels of progress ending in Sacch Khan – the abode of truth and bliss. Muslim Sufis were more explicit in delineating these progressive stages till they were able to abolish their own entities to merge with the divine, a process called *fanaa*.

The most lucid account of this quest is to be found in Mohyuddin ibn al Arabi's short treatise *Journey to the World of Power*, published in English translation. Arabi was born in Spain in A.D.1165 and died in Damascus in

A.D. 1240. He had his first mystical experience when he was only 20 years old. He waited another 20 years before he put it in the form of a letter to his stepson, Sadruddin.

Ibn Arabi has listed six stages before the searcher could 'sit on the carpet of his vision'. He assures seekers that 'while the paths are many, the way of truth is single', somewhat similar to the Rig Veda's *ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti* (there is one truth; there are many ways of expressing it). I will not go into the details of different stages of the *scala menti* – the mental ladder that a person has to climb to reach the ultimate.

What needs to be emphasized is that no matter how hard and conscientiously a person tries, he or she cannot reach the goal without the grace of God. This finds confirmation in Prophet Mohammed's night of ascension. When he is said to have travelled to Mecca in the blinking of an eyelid, Abu Jahal, one of the Prophet's chief detractors (hence the word '*jahalat*' for ignorance) was sceptical about the experience. He told the Prophet: 'Now lift one foot off the ground.' Prophet Mohammed complied. 'Now lift the other,' said Abu Jahal. 'I cannot,' replied the Prophet. 'If you cannot even lift your two feet off the ground how can you claim to have gone to the highest heaven last night?' demanded Abu Jahal. The Prophet replied: 'I did not say "I went". I said "I was taken".'

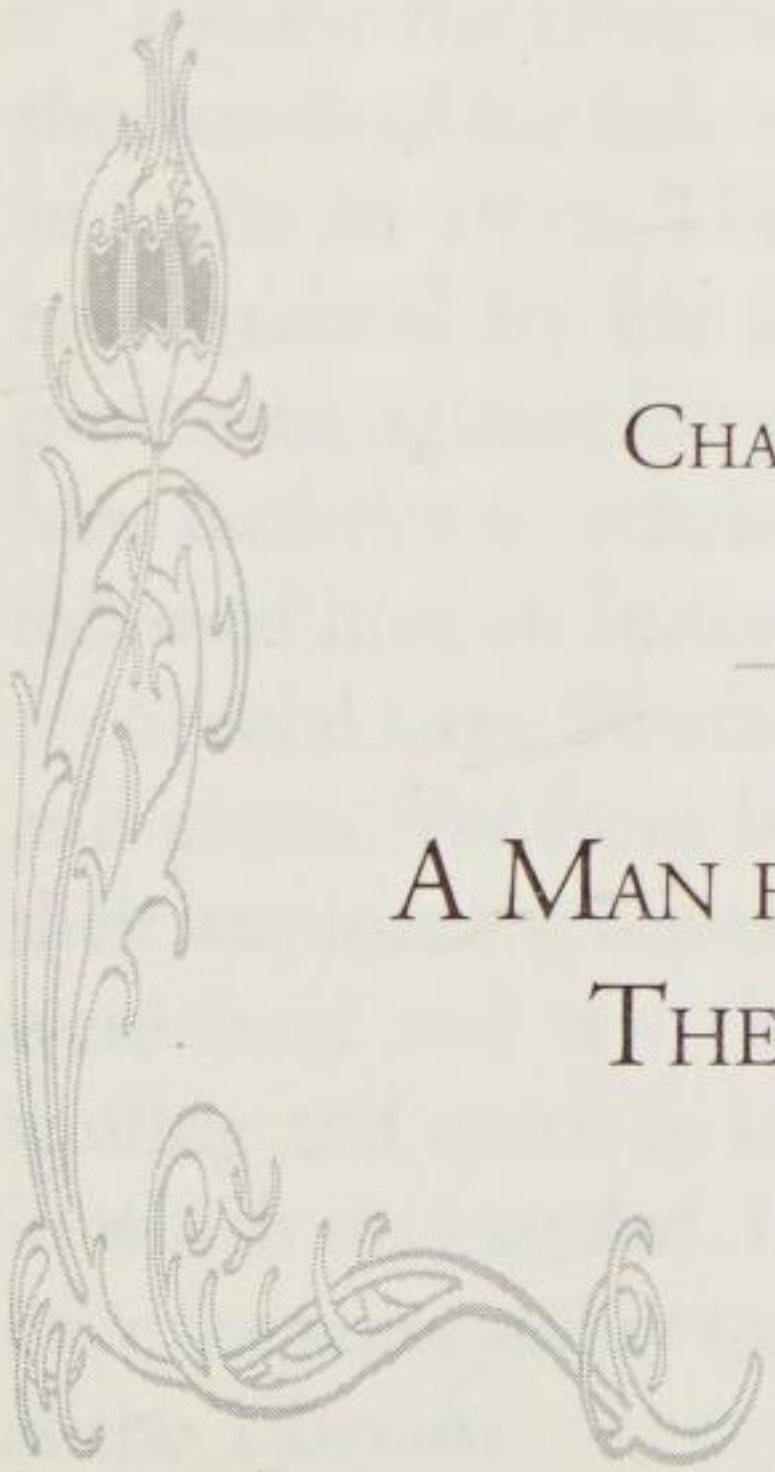
Ibn Arabi's death was dramatic. He was grieved to see how far the Damascenes had departed from Islam

and turned to the worship of mammon. 'People of Damascus', proclaimed Ibn Arabi, 'the God you worship is under my feet'. They did not understand his message and sentenced him to death. Before dying Ibn Arabi made a prophecy: 'When "seen" will enter "sheen" (letters of the Arabic alphabet) the truth will be discovered.'

When the Ottoman Sultan Salim II occupied Damascus in A.D. 1516, he ordered that the grave of Ibn Arabi be located and excavated. When this was done, they found a hoard of gold coins. The people then understood the prophecy and the message: Salim (seen) had entered 'sheen' (the Arabic name for Syria being 'shaam') and that the God the Damscenes had worshipped was gold.

I have strayed from the subject. All I want to ask seekers is: Is it worth spending so much time and effort to get a vison of the truth when the only guarantee of success is God's whim? I am reminded of Dwarka Das Shola's lines:

Taalaash-e-haqq mein na duniya chhor ai zaahid
Kaaheen ka bhee na raheyga agar khuda na mila.
(Preacher do not abandon the world in the quest
of truth.
If you do not find God, you will belong neither
here nor there.)



Chapter Thirteen

A Man for All Reasons: The Dalai Lama

I was exhilarated by being with him. He exuded an aura of goodwill, cheerfulness and crystal-clear honesty that envelops you long after you have left his presence. The Nobel Committee had done well in awarding him the peace prize in 1989 because he is a man of peace.

The invitation from His Holiness the Dalai Lama came through his representative in Delhi, Tashi Wangdi: His Holiness would be pleased to grant me an audience at his residence in Dharamshala (in Himachal Pradesh). Wangdi accompanied me in the train that took us to Pathankot (in Punjab). From there, we had to go by road to Dharamshala. I sleep badly in trains; all through the night I kept thinking of what I could ask the Dalai Lama. I had read his autobiography, *My Land and My People* (published in 1962), and some other books written by or on him, but had not obtained much information.

I knew the circumstances that had driven him and thousands of his followers from Tibet to seek sanctuary in India in 1959. The Indian Government had been embarrassed by his arrival and alternated between protesting against his presence and generously allowing him facilities to rehabilitate his countrymen who had followed him on Indian soil.

Several large Tibetan townships came up in our hills and plains. Far from being resented, the Tibetans won their way into the hearts of their Indian neighbours. They were (and are) law abiding, clean, disciplined, ever-smiling and quick to learn the languages of the regions in which they settled. I don't know another people who have the same ability to speak alien tongues to perfection as the Tibetans.

In his autobiography, *Freedom in Exile* (1990), the Dalai Lama wrote: 'There was no interference from Delhi over how I and the growing numbers of Tibetans conducted our lives. In accordance with popular requests, I had begun to give weekly audiences in the grounds of Birla House [in New Delhi]. This gave me the opportunity to meet a variety of people and tell them about the real situation in Tibet. It also helped me begin the process of removing the protocol which did so much to separate the Dalai Lama from his people. I had a strong feeling that we should not cling to old practices that were no longer appropriate. As I often reminded people, we were now refugees .... It is very easy to put others off by remaining aloof. So I was determined to be entirely open, to show everything and not to hide behind etiquette. In this way I hoped that poeople would relate to me as one human being to another.'

So what was I to ask His Holiness? I decided to avoid politics and ask him questions that had bothered me over the years. I have been an agnostic; he the reincarnation of God or the Buddha, I was not sure which of the two. As an incarnate he obviously believed in the theory of samsara – birth, death and rebirth in never-ending cycles, till the attainment of nirvana. As a rationalist, I could not accept this unproven theory. He also believed in karma of past lives influencing one's fate in one's present life. If that was so, what had this reincarnation of God or the Buddha done in his past life to be punished by being exiled from the land of his forefathers? I was not sure if

he would deign to answer such questions; he might dismiss them as impertinent. On the other hand, if he did, we would have a lively theological debate, which would give me good copy.

After a nearly three-hour drive through mountainous country, we reached Dharamshala. Mcleodganj, where most of the Tibetans live, was another half-an-hour's drive, high up a steep mountain. I was lodged in the Dalai Lama's guest house, a modest-sized bungalow overlooking Dharamshala. His mother had spent many years there before she died. It was looked after by the wife of his youngest brother, Tentzin Chogyal, a most attractive young lady and the mother of two children. She came over in the evening. I persuaded her to join us for a drink. I asked her if the questions I intended to ask would upset the Dalai Lama. 'I don't think so', she replied, in perfect English. 'In any case there is no harm in putting them to him. He must have had enough of answering questions about Tibet, communist China and his future plans.'

My appointment was for the next day afternoon. I got to his residence half an hour early to take in the surroundings. There was a large temple facing his well-guarded mansion. There were not many people in the temple; I saw one European monk sitting in deep meditation facing the statue of the Buddha. We were led into the residence and asked to wait in the sitting room as some German visitors were still with His Holiness. A few minutes later the party of Germans left by going

through the sitting room and we were asked to go in. The Dalai Lama had come out to the verandah to receive me. He apologized for keeping us waiting. He turned out to be much bigger sized than his photographs made him out to be: almost six feet in height. And muscular. His grip, as we shook hands, was like that of an all-in wrestler. I presented him with the customary scarf and he gave me one in return. I was escorted into his drawing room. I switched on my tape recorder and began as abruptly as I could: 'Your Holiness I am not going to ask you anything about politics, but …'

He interrupted me with a loud guffaw and said: 'Then we can relax. I have to be very cautious [while] answering political questions to journalists. What are you going to ask me?'

'I am an agnostic. I don't believe in God. What basis have you for saying God is the creator of the universe?'

Another guffaw of hearty laughter followed. He then stated: 'I don't say God created the world. The Buddha did not say God created the world. On the contrary, he said, "don't believe in anything that your reason does not accept".'

That floored me. I then asked my second question. 'In that case, what is reincarnation about?'

'We believe that people are reborn after death. If we did not, I would not be Dalai Lama.' Yet another explosion of laughter.

I held my ground: 'There is no scientific basis for believing in rebirth after death.'

He began to give me instances of children recalling their lives in earlier birth. Most of his examples came from India. I could sense that he was on uneasy ground. 'Those are all childish fantasies encouraged by parents. They disappear after a few months. I do not accept them as proofs,' I said.

'No one asks you to do so,' he replied calmly. He again quoted the Buddha about the supremacy of reason: 'If you can convince me that there is nothing in the theory of reincarnation I will also reject it.'

'Since you still believe in it, can you explain what you did in your previous birth to deserve being punished by being exiled from your homeland?'

The Dalai Lama's English is not as good as that of many of his followers. He had his secretary repeat my question in Tibetan and replied in a mixture of Tibetan and English. He then replied: 'Yes I am sure I and my fellow Tibetans are paying for wrongs committed by us in our previous birth. Otherwise it does not make sense.'

He realized that the answer did not make sense to me. We went on to other questions such as: Why wickedness so often triumphs over goodness? Why good people suffer while evil people prosper? Instead of the half-hour allotted to me, the interview went on for an hour and a half. The tape ran out. As did his secretary's patience; there were other visitors waiting to see the Dalai Lama.

I took his leave. I was exhilarated by being with him. He exuded an aura of goodwill, cheerfulness and crystal-

clear honesty that envelops you long after you have left his presence. The Nobel Committee had done well in awarding him the peace prize in 1989 because he is a man of peace. He has suffered many wrongs but has never uttered an angry word in protest. He has brought solace to millions of people who are troubled by the way world is going today.

Chapter Fourteen

Five-Star Religion: Swami Vivekananda

Rereading his [Swami Vivekananda's] thoughts confirmed my fears. There are lines that mean nothing: 'If matter is powerful, thought is omnipotent.' How wrong his prophecy about the collapse of the materially minded West and the renaissance of the spiritually minded East was ...

It started with the Bible. Every room in a five-star hotel used to keep a Bible in a drawer beside your bed, along with local telephone directories. You could dial-a-prayer free of charge and walk off with the Bible if you wanted to own one. Then Buddhism fast caught on. Fancy hotels in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Japan placed copies of the Dhammapada (a Buddhist scripture) in every bedroom. Not to be outdone Islamic nations followed suit. You get selections of the Holy Quran and sayings of Prophet Mohammed and Hazrat Ali in Muslim-owned hotels in the Middle East and North Africa.

I have yet to see copies of the Gita or the Upanishads in our hotels, but during one of my visits to Ranchi (now the capital of Jharkhand), I noticed that M. N. Chowdhury, the-then manager of the Ashok Hotel, used to present two booklets – *Vivekananda: His Call to the Nation* and Swami Vivekananda's *Thoughts of Power* – to every guest. So, for the two days I was in Ranchi, I read Swami Vivekananda.

When it comes to preaching, we Indians have nothing to be sanctimonious about. We are the world's greatest teachers of morality, which we do not follow ourselves. Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–86) and Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) are two of Bengal's top godmen of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. Vivekananda, like other godmen, had a lot of legends grown around him. He believed in the cult of the superman: 'The older I grow, the more everything seems to me to lie in manliness. This is the new gospel,' he said. I have heard stirring speeches on the greatness of Swami Vivekananda and how he made an impact by his rousing oration at the first Congress of Religions in Chicago in September 1893. His admirers would have you believe that his speech was a stunning performance that shook the Western world. This is a myth of our own making. I looked up contemporary records of American papers of the time, which do not bear this out. He undoubtedly was a handsome, powerfully built man and a good orator but by no means as great a thinker as his admirers make him out to be. However, if India's millions want to believe that Vivekananda shook the world, who am I to question their conviction?

Rereading his thoughts confirmed my fears. There are lines that mean nothing. For instance: 'If matter is powerful, thought is omnipotent.' How wrong his prophecy about the collapse of the materially minded West and the renaissance of the spiritually minded East was can be gauged from what he wrote over a hundred years ago:

> Europe, the centre of the manifestation of material energy, will crumble into dust within 50 years if she is not mindful to change her

> position, to shift her ground and make spirituality the basis of her life. And what will save Europe is the religion of the Upanishads.

Europe has not crumbled; the land of the Upanishads has.

In his enthusiasm for physical fitness, Swami Vivekananda wrote:

> First of all, our young men must be strong. Religion will come afterwards. Be strong, my young friends; that is my advice to you. You will be nearer to Heaven through football than through the study of Gita. These are bold words, but I have to say them, for I love you. I know where the shoe pinches. I have gained a little experience. You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles a little stronger. You will understand the mighty genius and the mighty strength of Krishna better with a little of strong blood in you. You will understand the Upanishads better and the glory of the Atman when your body stands firm upon your feet, and you feel yourselves as men.

Writing on God and religion he wrote:

> There is a vast difference between saying, 'food, food' and eating it; between saying, 'water, water'

and drinking it. So, by merely repeating the words 'God, God' we cannot hope to attain realization. We must strive and practice.

If I am wrong, I crave the forgiveness of millions of Swamiji's disciples and admirers.

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